

Comments on Jennifer Lackey's  
*Group Belief:*  
*Lessons from Lies and Bullshit*



**ILYA KASAVIN,**  
***INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY, RAS***

# Summary



- Концепция Дженнифер Лэки представляет собой не совсем последовательный вариант неклассической социальной эпистемологии, в которой природа коллективных верований призвана объясняться рядом социокультурных факторов.
- Мои замечания: ни «группа», ни «верование» не получили ясного определения; нет критерия когнитивно релевантных и нерелевантных социальных факторов; сохраняется противопоставление индивида и группы.
- Мои предложения: более последовательно провести эту точку зрения можно, используя понимание группы М. Дуглас; следует показать социальную природу индивида; если редуцировать верование к выражениям языка, то желательно более полно привлечь инструментарий философии языка и дискурс-анализа.

# Epistemology: from classical to nonclassical



- The classical epistemology includes the assumption that the cognitive phenomena can be normatively separated into two groups. On the one hand, there are justified true beliefs or knowledge; on the other, there are deviations like falsehood, deception, lie, bullshit. The first group can teach us about what rationality is, due to the sense-empirical origin and its social sterility; the second one is a sphere of irrationality, chaos, arbitrary will, all due to the conceptual and social superfluity.

# Non-classical approach endorsed



- The considerations provided by Jennifer Lackey seem to be tending beyond the limits of the classical epistemology. Namely, she reestablishes the epistemological value of cognitive deviations like lies and bullshit, assuming that we can learn about the nature of group belief from examining them.
- Her analysis is highly illuminating for it shows how heterogeneous the cognitive phenomena really are. Beliefs, testimonies, knowledge claims – all these include things which are normally seen as different and even completely opposed to each other. There are mental events and social rules, intuitions and deliberations, individual morality and social responsibility, political engagement and rational decision making. These considerations tacitly lead to the assumption that the edge between knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehood can be hardly seen as absolute and evident.

# Two Types of Social Epistemology



- This also recalls that there are at least two types of social epistemology.
- The first one (exemplified in A. Goldman's social epistemics) strongly differentiates between true and false beliefs dubbing the former as knowledge and the latter as delusion.
- The second one (for instance D. Bloor's strong program) pays little attention to the task of truth evaluation preferring to view as knowledge everything that is taken as knowledge in social practice, particularly as a scheme or rule guiding human activity and communication. In fact, Lackey agrees with this, assuming that "one classic role of belief is, that together with desire, it rationalizes action".

# Symmetry Principle



- Lackey's account of knowledge presupposes that it is much more meaningful to analyze concrete forms and determinations of cognition within social/cultural systems instead of investing efforts into the demarcationist strategy, which anyway gives limited and ideologically laden results.
- What follows is that true and false knowledge whatever are their criteria, should be considered (interpreted, reconstructed) in terms of the same types of conditions and causes (the principle of symmetry).
- Lackey seems to endorse this principle. Many of her thought experiments (Philosophy Department, Tobacco Company, Oil Company etc.) show that true beliefs as well as deception, lie, bullshit should be explained in terms of equally taken facts, logic, social, political and commercial interests.

# Collective epistemology = social epistemology?



- The difference between two versions of social epistemology spreads also upon the nature of the cognitive agent. Goldman's individual agent is opposed to Bloor's collective one. My opinion is that social epistemology in a proper sense begins with the social/collectivist approach only and vice versa.
- Social epistemology avoiding introspectionism and relying on social and human sciences can provide more or less objective results due to the shift from individual to the collective agent.

# PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT 1



- Lackey's cases apparently serve for the clarification of what relevant and irrelevant in the cognitive matters.
- The first thesis Lackey intends to illustrate is as follows: a group can be properly said to believe that  $p$ , even when not a single of its members believes that  $p$ . And a description of the correspondent cognitive situation is entitled  
PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT 1:
- The Philosophy Department at a leading university is deliberating about the final candidate to whom they will extend admission to their graduate program. After a discussion, they all jointly agree that Jane Smith is the most qualified candidate from the pool of applicants. However, not a single member of the department actually believes this; instead, they all think that this is the candidate who is most likely to be approved by the administration.

# PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT 2



- The second thesis: a group can be properly said to not believe that  $p$ , even when every single one of its members believes that  $p$ .
- Description: PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT 2: The same Philosophy Department described above also turns out to be such that every single one of its members believes that the best red pepper hummus in Chicago can be found at Whole Foods. Despite the unanimity of individual belief in such a case, it is not correct to say that the Philosophy Department believes that the best red pepper hummus in Chicago can be found at Whole Foods. This is because assessment of red pepper hummus is entirely irrelevant to the goals and purposes of the group.

# On Philosophy Department 1:

## The choice criteria



- Instead of explaining (individual or collective) beliefs in terms of (individual or collective) beliefs why not explaining beliefs with the help of their social representations, e.g. practical actions including speech acts?
- If, say, the Philosophical Department unanimously votes for the most qualified candidate for the graduate program, what properties of the candidate are taken into account as essential? Her academic achievements (credits, papers, publications)? Social activities or behavior in the classroom? Race, sex, health and wealth? The social status of her parents? But how can they be rationally separated? If a white student originates from a lower social stratum, she will be possibly defeated in the eyes of University administration by the same Anglo-Saxon, whose father invested a couple of millions into the University infrastructure. For the latter provides conditions for education and allows many students participating in the like programs.

# Are “non-scientific factor irrelevant?”



- Any other “non-scientific” preferences can be chosen as well, e.g. the proportion of female and male students. The reasons for this could be easily found in the ideology of pluralist society, where the intellectual differences of sexes are taken seriously.
- Clearly, every University department as a whole is interested in the quantity of students, trying to survive in the competition. Being a department member means to have a right for a qualified decision. Being a social institute is not an accidental or contingent property of contemporary science and education system.
- Otherwise all institutional dimensions should be considered “external” and irrelevant to the production and distribution of knowledge.

## On Philosophy Department 2: Non-scientific factors differ



- In fact the engagement to keep the department's interests differs *in quality* from the commitment to chili hummus in Whole Foods: philosophy teachers of Philosophy Department 2 are only *randomized* experts in the Middle East cuisine.
- In order to make a qualified decision about the quality of hummus, the broader group of customers should engage in the opinion poll.
- The joint and unanimous sensitivity to food quality provides no foundation for collective belief because of the absence of a proper group in the Philosophy Department 2.
- And another group (the Philosophy Department 1) though strongly influenced by ideological and corporative reasons, does manage to produce the collective belief.

# The Concept of “Group”



- Surprisingly, but what lacks here in the story told by Lackey is the definition of “group”.
- Group can be seen as a unit of a certain kind: epistemological (invisible college members, believers), sociological (citizens, customers), cultural (tradition followers), anthropological (tribe, nation), biological (species, population). A real human interaction takes place among groups, which at least partly belong to many types at the same time. Sociology normally dubs belonging to group a social role.
- So it would be meaningful for the collective epistemology to single out the group type under investigation introducing correspondent criteria.

# Grid-Group Analysis



- I personally would try to construct the concept of group by rethinking Mary Douglas' grid-group analysis.
- She defines "Group" as an experience of limited social community (Douglas M. *Implicit Meanings*. London, 1975. P. 218), a belonging to group, collective consciousness.
- In turn, "Grid" is every social regulation except the belonging to a group (Douglas M. (Ed.) *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*. London, 1982. P. 2). D. Bloor interprets "Grid" as follows: a pattern of roles and statuses is considered as grid within social boundaries (Op. cit. P. 191-218).
- To put it another way, "Group" serves as an external boundary making everything else unspecifically differ from the group. And "Grid" as internal structure makes one group differ from another group. Douglas also introduces high and low levels of these parameters for any group.

# Group Types



- The Douglas' table presupposes 4 types of group (though she singles out only 3 of them) and looks as follows:

Army	Group in alteration (scientific revolution)
<b>A</b>  High Group High Grid	<b>B</b>  Low Group Low Grid
<b>C</b>  High Group Low Grid	<b>D</b>  Low Group High Grid
Primitive tribe	"Normal" scientific community

# Philosophy Departments: grid-group analysis



- Applying this approach to our cases, we may say that Philosophy Department 1 is a group due to its grid-group features, both of which are clearly represented.
- In contrast to that, Philosophy Department 2 is a group to a great extent devoid of grid that is of any internal structure and qualification. Its external “group” boundary doesn’t exist as well, for any customer within sociological opinion poll of this kind is identical to philosophy teacher.

# English Department



- Pretty similar is the case of English Department.
- ENGLISH DEPARTMENT: The English Department at a leading university is deliberating about the final candidate to whom they will extend admission to their graduate program. All of the members jointly accept that the best candidate for admission is Sarah Peters, but half of them agree to this because they believe that she is a highly qualified applicant and half of them agree to this because they believe that she is a highly unqualified applicant. The latter half of the department is made up of a contingency of disgruntled employees who wish to sabotage their own department and regard “the best candidate for admission” as the applicant who will most likely pull the program’s rankings down.

# Comments on English Department case



- It seems that this Department is essentially composed of two types of group: **B** and **D**. Both cannot reconcile their interests and hence promote different strategy of the department development. It is evidently a result of unsuccessful activity of the department head who failed to collect a proper staff and to coordinate collective efforts towards collaboration. In this case any collective belief is impossible, and the vote outcome should be properly interpreted as illusory one.
- So the department members can not, in contrast with that how Lackey put it, “jointly accept a given proposition, but for different and indeed competing reasons”. Rather they act *as if* they accept it, but their opposed motivations fail to produce any joint belief.
- So the descriptions of cases take different dimensions of knowledge into account. Since the definition of group lacks we cannot speak properly about what group beliefs really are: mental events, behavioral acts or communicative decisions.

# Personal and official



- Another objection concerns the comparison of some cases analyzed by Lackey. It seems that there is pretty small difference between the cases of Medical Association, Tobacco Company and Oil Company. The members of all these groups in question do have reasons for believing and not believing the official declaration, and these reasons are not subjective but represent different expert opinions about these matters.
- Exactly the same as with vaccine, there are dubious arguments for and against smoking or using aggressive means for neutralizing oil spots: their merits and demerits can be rationally discussed.
- It seems that there is always a disagreement between a personal position and a position in favor of group and grid features of community. And speaking for any community always means disregarding someone's personal opinions.

# Aggregation of Beliefs



- So aggregation of beliefs can hardly be a mechanical connection or mathematical adding. Here Lackey's approach to shifting from beliefs to words is especially fruitful. Logical rules of constructing syllogisms by combining premises and analyzing tables similar to truth tables are applicable here, what has been seen in the thought experiments proposed by Pettit (Tobacco Company etc.)
- Even more: we should use here the methodology of discourse analysis, which provides more tools for accounting motivations, intuitions, hesitations, doubts and many other semantic and pragmatic dimensions of what is called illocutive and performative speech acts. If we advocate shifting from mental events to linguistic phenomena, the whole tool kit of philosophy of language should be implemented.

# Personality and group: towards the equality of epistemic rights?



- Then, instead of comparing individual and group beliefs, it might be more reasonable to confront the real inherent heterogeneity of a developed group (high grid parameter), on the one side, and its coordinated declaration (if any) on the other (high group parameter). The former is due to a variety of epistemological, cultural and social peculiarities of the group member, while the latter is a product of the communicative sociality supporting the survival in the broader surroundings.
- Unfortunately it would be again a false dichotomy: a communicative sociality is an inherent quality of every socialized personality, which requires this or that kind of group agreement. In turn, the personal peculiarity is not purely an anthropological phenomenon being an outcome of person's social roles and her belonging to a diversity of groups. So neither personality nor group is, philosophically speaking, an abstraction of the higher level of generality; they are conceptually equal.

# Personal beliefs don't exist?



- What follows is that every belief is an aggregation – of epistemic, cultural and social features, which can be only conditionally separated from each other. Even sense impressions are socially cultivated and culturally determined. And every expert opinion represents not a single personality but a certain group of experts.
- *Hence there are no personal beliefs at all.*
- It is a speech act only that may proceed in the first person though implementing collective means of linguistic expression and presenting an aggregation of some collective beliefs.