

INTRODUCTION

This issue of *EPISTEME* includes two articles on collective epistemology and two articles on matters closely related to testimony. The first two articles in the issue, by Margaret Gilbert and by Raimo Tuomela, concern collective epistemology. Harvey Siegel raises questions about how social epistemology can serve the interests of educational theory. And André Kukla and Joel Walmsley appropriate recent work on testimony and expertise to judge whether nonmystics are justified in accepting the claims of mystics.

Gilbert's article, "Collective Epistemology," addresses the question of group belief. The central issue in this area is whether the beliefs of social groups boil down to the beliefs or other personal states of group members, or instead amount to something over and above personal states. Gilbert argues for a nonreductive view, in line with her plural subject theory of collectivity presented in her important book, *On Social Facts*, and developed in many subsequent articles.

Gilbert begins with an astute methodological observation. Epistemologists have generally constructed accounts of belief and knowledge by considering what those states are like in individual human beings. We do, however, routinely ascribe belief and knowledge to subjects other than individual human beings — to nonhuman animals and social groups of human beings. One worries that constructing an account of belief entirely on the basis of observations about individuals human beings will inadvertently lead to writing into the account features specific to individual human belief but false of beliefs in general. The best way to guard against an error of this sort would be to construct an account of belief for subjects of diverse kinds and then generalize these accounts. Gilbert proposes to construct an account of group belief.

Gilbert offers a critique of a reductive account of collective belief — the *simple summative*

account, according to which, e.g., the union believes management is unreasonable when and only when all or most members of the union believe this. Gilbert raises some persuasive objections to the summative account. The account does not give a necessary condition of collective belief. The union may believe management is unreasonable if it votes so; yet an individual's voting so does not entail the individual's personally believing so. According to Gilbert, an ascription of collective belief is in order when members of the population "have all indicated their readiness to let the belief in question be established as the group's belief." This shifts the locus of collective belief from personal belief to open expressions of readiness for a certain outcome with respect to the population. On this view, there can be collective belief *p* in a population even if no members of the population personally believe *p*. Gilbert also argues that the summative account does not offer a sufficient condition of collective belief. Individual members of a court may each have a personal opinion on a matter, but the *court* has no opinion on the matter, at least not until the matter has been discussed and decided. Gilbert proposes that parties to a group belief understand that a member who expresses the opposite belief, without qualifying this as an expression of personal opinion, is laying herself open to rebuke by other members. Rebuke is a form of punishment, and it motivates people to tow the group's line. Gilbert observes that this fits Durkheim's view that collective beliefs have coercive power.

Gilbert calls her account of collective belief a *plural subject* account. In collective belief, members of a population *P* express something the expression of which by all, as all understand, suffices for the truth of the ascription of the belief to *P*. The outcome of these expressions is that members of *P* are jointly committed to believe as

a body that p . An individual's *personal* commitment is unilaterally created, can be unilaterally rescinded, and gives the individual a reason to do what she is committed to doing. A population's joint commitment is not a conjunction of personal commitments but is jointly created, and can be rescinded only with the concurrence of all. Joint commitments generate obligations of performance on the part of members. The joint commitment involved in collective belief will tend to be fulfilled if each member expresses the belief when acting as a member of the group, though not when acting in *propria persona*.

The article ends with a defense of the literal truth of ascriptions of collective belief from the charge that such ascriptions may be dismissed as metaphorical (like ascriptions of belief to a train) or as false. One could argue that collective beliefs lack a feature essential to beliefs. But to do so, one would have to appeal to a general account of belief, and the question would arise why we should take beliefs generally to have the required features when collective beliefs do not.

Gilbert suggests that her account can be used to test proposed general accounts of belief. For example, we can test the proposal that believing p is being disposed to act as if p is true by asking whether a population whose members are jointly committed to being disposed to act as if p is true is thereby disposed to act as if p is true. If the answer is No, then the account fails the test.

In the second article in this issue, "Group Knowledge Analyzed," Tuomela develops further his extensive earlier work on group cognition. He begins by isolating a notion of *impersonal knowledge*, an example of which would be that it is accepted as knowledge that copper expands when heated. Impersonal knowledge depends on the knowledge of an actual agent in a group. This knowledge is available to individual members. In some cases, the group as a group knows. The knowledge that p must be justified in the sense that the group is objectively and socially justified in its acceptance of p . When the knowledge is personal, the individual knower must also be justified in accepting p . Having justification for p means having reasons for the truth of p and (in the personal case, at least) being able to use p in reasoning and action.

Tuomela proposes that knowledge is context-

dependent in the sense that it depends on the criteria of justification that apply in the case. What counts as good epistemic reasons for a layperson may be poor reasons for a specialist. So a claim that is justified for one group need not be justified for another in which the same reasons are available. However, Tuomela also thinks of knowledge as embedded in a further context involving an evaluator of the knowledge. He accordingly attends to claims of the form: group g^* accepts that group g knows that p . What he has in mind, I think, is that there can be differences in epistemic standards such that, relative to the standards of an evaluator group g^* , p is justified for g , while relative to the standards of a different evaluator group, g' , p is not justified for g . In this instance, there is no unique truth value for the claim " p is justified for g ." Of course, the earlier point that what counts as a good reason for a layperson may be a poor reason for a specialist does not show that there is such a relativity to *evaluators'* standards; it shows only that there is an evaluator-independent subject-relative difference in the standards that apply to laypersons and to specialists.

Tuomela focuses on the case of normatively binding group belief and knowledge. In this case, the group is instrumentally obligated to reason and act on the belief in question and (to some extent) fulfill this obligation. Such knowledge requires that some members know the proposition, and this involves that these members believe the proposition in *we-mode* (i.e., they function with respect to the proposition in certain ways as group members). The members need not privately believe the proposition.

The article also distinguishes natural group beliefs (i.e., group beliefs about the external world) from constitutive institutional group beliefs (about facts which are performatively created and collectively accepted). The truth of the latter beliefs is up to the group that believes them. Normatively binding group beliefs are presumably (typically) examples of constitutive institutional group beliefs.

Tuomela argues that when a group knows that p qua group, the operative group members must share a justifying joint reason for p . He also argues that constitutive institutional knowledge differs from natural knowledge in having criteria

of justification that are wholly social (based on collective or joint acceptance). For the group to have a justified constitutive institutional group belief, it need only function properly. If members use squirrel pelt as money, then squirrel pelt is money for the group, and the group is justified in their belief that squirrel pelt is money for the group.

The third article in this issue is Siegel's "Epistemology and Education: An Incomplete Guide to the Social-Epistemological Issues." The article samples several issues about education to which Siegel has made notable contributions in the past. Siegel uses his sample to make the point that social epistemology can aid educational theory in resolving some of its most important disputes, and the illumination should be mutual.

First is the question of the fundamental epistemic aim(s) of education. Siegel questions Alvin Goldman's proposal that true belief is the "most pervasive and characteristic goal of education," on the ground that this allows such educationally illicit techniques as brainwashing, and it leaves out a concern to enable students to form beliefs for the right reasons and a concern to develop the ability to judge the truth competently. Siegel also questions the alternative, more popular view that the crucial epistemic aim of education is to enable students to think rationally or critically. Is critical thinking an epistemic end or merely a means to the end of true belief? Siegel proposes, plausibly, the pluralist view that *both* true belief and rationality are fundamental ends of education.

A second issue Siegel treats is whether students should accept all the pronouncements of their teachers or accept only those teachings that are independently justified. Siegel suggests that trust without independent justification is more appropriate for very young students than for older students. He proposes that students do typically require testimony-independent reasons to regard their teachers' pronouncements as trustworthy.

A third issue Siegel addresses is the nature of indoctrination and its value, and the related issue of the value of critical scrutiny. Is indoctrination inevitable? Is it to be avoided whenever possible?

Siegel takes as a fourth issue whether certain values associated with education, such as critical thinking, are absolutely or objectively correct, or only correct relative to a culture.

A fifth issue is how social concerns of

inclusion, exclusion, and multiculturalism relate to epistemology. The moral judgment that cultural differences ought to be accepted and acknowledged in an educational setting is itself offered from a culturally neutral stance. Is this a consistent position? Another question is whether particular aims like fostering rationality are culture-specific aims.

A sixth and last issue Siegel raises is who should study which subjects in the course of education. And which subjects and theories should be covered in the curriculum? The epistemic status of creationism and evolutionary theory clearly bears on whether and how these theories should be taught in biology courses.

The final article in this issue is Kukla and Walmsley's "Mysticism and Social Epistemology." The authors review the basis for accepting the purported ineffable insights of mystics. Should a nonmystic believe these claims? The authors answer the question by employing some recent work on expertise by Alvin Goldman.

Kukla and Walmsley begin by examining William James's position that the claims of a mystic do not impose a duty of the audience to believe uncritically; the most they establish is a presumption in their favor. The authors offer plausible grounds for rejecting Herbert Feigl's verificationist requirement that the claim can be subjected to a test to verify it.

The authors then model the mystic-audience relation on an expert-novice relation in which the novice (the audience) has evidence for the expert's (the mystic's) claim. So modeled, the question whether the audience has sufficient evidence for the mystic's claim can be addressed by considering Alvin Goldman's list of sources of evidence for expertise in an expert-novice relation. The authors observe that Goldman's first two sources of evidence clearly do not apply to the mystic-novice relation. The other sources of evidence are also unlikely to be availing. The first two sources of evidence are argumentative justification (either direct justification for the belief or indirect justification for the expert's credentials) and the pronouncements of meta-experts (experts about who the experts are). These sources are clearly ruled out in the case of mysticism, since the mystic has no argument, and the meta-expert would have to be a visionary herself (raising the

same problem of judging whether she is a genuine meta-expert). The third source of evidence, consensus, gives little evidence for truth, since an alternative explanation of consensus is universal human bias. Here there is an interesting discussion of the constructivist-perennialist debate about mysticism and of nonconceptual content. The fourth source of evidence is signs of distorting bias in one among competing experts. For example, we would assign more credence to testimony that doesn't serve the mystic's interests than to testimony that does serve her interests. But in the case of the mystic, there is no reason to expect support from this sort of evidence. For mystics do not generally offer testimony of the required sort. The fifth source of evidence is the expert's track-record. What is desired is that the mystic has powers (including powers of prediction) that she attributes to her ineffable insight. But unfortunately the evidence that putative mystics have powers that derive from their ineffable insights is weak. Thus, Goldman's five sources of evidence about expertise lend little credence to the mystic's claims.

Kukla and Walmsley add a sixth source of evidence about expertise to Goldman's five sources. An expert is said to be *epistemically*

modest if she keeps her claims to a bare minimum because she has a high threshold of certainty for making a claim. An expert's track record of past true claims bears on whether we should accept her current claim, but it is also quite relevant what standards the expert employs in making a claim. One expert might make fewer claims than another, so that we have a less extensive track record of true claims; yet this might result from the expert employing a higher standard of certainty in making claims; if so she should get more credit for the few claims she does make. This source of evidence could potentially give us grounds for accepting a mystic's claims.

The authors also consider whether, given that acceptance of testimony is the default position, we should accept the mystic's testimony. Doing so would require the absence of defeaters of the mystic's claims. The authors propose that the system's claims are often "too good to be true," and thus the claims are suspicious on that ground. Countervailing this potential defeater of the mystic's claims are the extraordinary mental and emotional skills of some mystics. The authors' best advice is that we keep an open mind.

These four articles further our thinking about collective epistemology and testimony.

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