Collective Epistemic Agency

Deborah Perron Tollefsen

Who Knows? According to contemporary analytic epistemology only individuals do. This individualistic bias is present in standard analyses of knowledge. The "S" of "S knows that p" is always an individual cognizer. The idea that collectives could be genuine knowers has received little, if any, serious consideration.[1] This form of epistemic individualism, call it *epistemic agent individualism*, seems to be motivated by the view that epistemology is about things that go on inside the head. As one prominent analytic epistemologist puts it, "Knowers are individuals, and knowledge is generated by mental processes and lodged in the mind-brain" (Goldman, 1987).

In this paper I challenge e*pistemic agent individualism* by arguing that certain groups can be epistemic agents. In section I, I develop an account of epistemic agency based on the work of Tyler Burge. In section II, I extend this account of epistemic agency to groups. In section III, I consider whether my thesis supports the view, put forth by some feminist epistemologists, that social groups or communities are the *primary* epistemic agents.

I

The account of epistemic agency I develop in this section relies on Tyler Burge's discussion of the first person concept in his "Reason and the First Person."(1998) In that article Burge argues that in order to fully understand reasoning and reason one must employ the first person or I-concept. Here I make a stronger claim that in order to engage in the sorts of reasoning we associate with full fledge epistemic agents (agents with reflective knowledge not mere animal knowledge)—one must have a first person point of view— or as I will call it,

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1 There have been recent attempts by "mainstream" epistemologists to understand "social" knowledge but these accounts still do not acknowledge groups as legitimate epistemic agents. See, for instance, Corlett (1996), Lehrer (1987), and Goldman (1999). Some feminist epistemologists [e.g. Longino (1990) and Nelson (1990)] have put forward less individualistic accounts of epistemic agency. See section III of this paper for how my own account compares with Nelson's.

a rational point of view. The first person singular concept or I-concept marks this rational point of view. But as we shall see, it is not the only concept that plays this role. This account will, no doubt, be sketchy but I think it will provide an adequate framework for considering the issue of whether groups can be epistemic agents.

An epistemic agent is a deliberator that is subject to epistemic assessment; she can be charged with incoherency, inconsistency, ambiguity and so on. Reasoning or deliberation involves the application of rational norms and the evaluation of attitudes and relations between them. But it is not simply the application of norms that makes for epistemic agency. After all, a computer could apply epistemic norms to its own attitudes but we would not, most of us, think of computers as genuine epistemic agents. To be a deliberator in the rich sense in which you or I deliberate is to be subject to the immediacy that is characteristic of reasons. When we engage in reasoning (and assuming we have the appropriate desires) we are moved to act immediately or think in accordance with the reasons that we arrive at through deliberation.[2] We are moved to implement the reasons in a way that shapes and informs our attitudes. When we rationally assess the behavior of others, this immediacy is lacking. We might recognize that John has a reason to change his attitudes about a certain scientific theory, for instance, but this reason does not have immediacy for us as it would were John to acknowledge it. As Tyler Burge puts it, "All reasons that thinkers (deliberators) have are reasons-to not merely rational appraisals" (1998, 250).

In order to be a deliberator, then, one must be able to discern which attitudes and acts should be immediately shaped and informed. Following Burge, I think it is the first person concept that allows one to identify those attitudes for which it is rationally immediate to change or inform according to reason and rational evaluation. No other impersonal concept can do this because no other concept has associated with it responsibility and accountability. Acknowledging reasons as one's own is acknowledging such responsibility. The first-person concept, of which the singular is paradigmatic, is the only concept that fills this function. Consider, for instance, an impersonal attribution of irrationality to a judgment of the form: "It is judged that …". This assessment has no immediacy. It makes explicit no immediate reason to alter the commitment being evaluated,

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2   I am aware that this way of talking presupposes a certain non-Humean account of practical rationality. I do not have the space here to enter into this debate. It is not clear to me, however, that adopting either a Humean or non-Humean account is a problem for my project.

for the judgment is not attached to a judge.[3] It is only when we identify this attitude as our own—"I judge ..." that this assessment moves me to re-evaluate my commitment.[4]

Such identification takes place from a rational point of view. This locus of power and responsibility is presupposed in our epistemic assessments of deliberators. We could not hold epistemic agents responsible and accountable for their own attitudes if we did not also suppose they had a rational point of view from which they could assess their own attitudes for consistency, truth, and intelligibility. The first person singular concept or I-concept, then, marks a unique locus of power and responsibility—it identifies an epistemic agent. In what follows, I argue that the I-concept is not the only first person concept that plays this role. The first person *plural* concept or we-concept often marks a unique locus of power and responsibility. Reflection on group deliberation contexts will reveal this.

II

Recent work in jurisprudence (Kornhauser and Sager 1986; Chapman 1998; Brennan 1999)[5] has identified a dilemma that arises when a group of judges arrives at a verdict based on previous judgments regarding the factors that ought to determine the case. The judges vote on whether the relevant factors obtain and then let their votes on those issues determine what the verdict should be. This way of determining the verdict can lead to results that differ from those they would arrive at if the judges made individual decisions on the case and

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3   Likewise a third-person attribution would lack the sort of immediacy needed to make reasons relevant for an individual subject. An assessment of irrationality to a judgment of the form "She judges that ..." will not have immediacy for me unless I acknowledge that she is me.

4   The point is reminiscent, of course, of Perry's discussion of the role of the indexical in reasoning in (1979).

5   Pettit appeals to the paradox in a paper he presented at the Erasmus Summer School on Social Ontology (2000) and in (2001). He argues that the paradox (or as he calls it the "discursive dilemma") supports the view that certain groups are persons. I use the paradox in (2002a) to establish a weaker point. I think the paradox shows us how groups can meet the criterion for being intentional agents. There is more, however, to personhood than intentionality. My account also differs from Pettit in that I start with an interpretationist understanding of intentionality and emphasize the role of the rational point of view. In this paper I use the paradox to establish epistemic agency. Again, this differs from Pettit's use of the paradox. I am greatly indebted to Pettit, however. I follow his discussion of the paradox closely.

then aggregated the votes. Indeed, in many cases there is a stark discontinuity between what each individual judge believes regarding the verdict and what the court decides collectively regarding the verdict. Consider the following example given by Philip Pettit (2000):

   A panel of judges must find the defendant liable if and only if it finds, (1) that the defendant was negligent and that her negligence was responsible for the injury to the plaintiff, and (2) that the defendant had a duty to care for the plaintiff. Imagine that the judges A, B, and C vote on those issues and on the related matter of whether the defendant is liable.

	Cause of harm?	Duty of Care?	Liable?
A.	Yes	No	No
B.	No	Yes	No
C.	Yes	Yes	Yes

There are two ways that the court might make its decision. They might vote simply on the issue of liability. They would engage in deliberations about the case and the relevant issues and arrive at their independent judgments. They would then aggregate their votes with respect to the issue of liability and let the majority view on that issue determine the court's decision. Following Pettit, I will call this the *conclusion-driven approach*. Given the above matrix and this approach, the defendant would not be found liable since there are two votes against liability. The court could also aggregate their votes with respect to the individual issues of causation and duty and let the conclusion be accepted—that the defendant is guilty—if and only if both premises are endorsed by a majority. Call this, again following Pettit, the *premise-driven approach*. Since each premise does have majority support, the defendant would be found guilty on this approach. If they adopt the *conclusion-driven approach*, the court will be endorsing a conclusion that is inconsistent with how the majority voted regarding the related issues. If the court adopts the *premise-driven approach* then they may collectively endorse a conclusion that a majority of them individually reject. This is the dilemma.[6] The research on decision-making reveals

6   The dilemma is not confined to cases where a court has to make a decision with reference to a conjunction of premises. It also arises in disjunctive cases. Consider the following example given by Kornhauser and Sager (1993): Imagine that three judges have to make a decision on whether or not someone should be given a retrial. A retrial is admissible either in the event of inadmissible evidence having been used or in the event of a forced confession. The voting goes as follows (Kornhauser and Sager 1993, 40):

that the courts often adopt the *premise-driven approach*. But how could the court rule that the defendant is guilty if no individual judge believes that the evidence supports such a verdict? What could be the justification for adopting the premise-driven approach?

The justification for the *premise-driven approach* becomes apparent only when we acknowledge that the norms of rationality apply to groups as well as individuals. The constraints we recognize as applying to our own beliefs, constraints that we could loosely call epistemological, govern collective judgments.[7] If the court has already established that the relevant issues will determine the verdict they cannot simply disregard the fact that a majority believes that the relevant factors obtain. The *premise-driven approach* avoids the possibility that the court collectively endorse an inconsistent or incoherent set of propositions. Thus, the *premise-driven approach* preserves the rationality of the group.[8]

The legal dilemma is rather perplexing. It turns out that courts can make judgments that are rejected by each of their members. Even more

	Inadmissable evidence?	Forced Confession?	Retrial
A.	Yes	No	Yes
B.	No	Yes	Yes
C.	No	No	No

If majority voting is all that is required for a group to reject one of the premises then the premise-driven approach will lead to giving the defendant a retrial, while the conclusion driven-approach will not.

7   These include such imperatives as: do not act contrary to your best judgment, draw inductive inferences on the basis of all available relevant evidence, believe only things you take to be true, don't believe inconsistencies, and so on.

8   The irrationality of the conclusion-driven approach can be seen more clearly if we consider diachronic rather than synchronic cases. In these cases the verdict is determined on the basis of precedence or previous court judgments some of which may not be the judgments of the current court. Adopting the conclusion-driven approach will often result in a complete disregard of previous decisions made by a group. The current decision will, therefore, not cohere with past judgments made by the court. The court has the option of disregarding its past judgments or reinterpreting them but such a practice would, if it were implemented all the time, undermine the integrity and identity of the court. As Pettit points out, the court will not be able to present itself as a credible promoter of its purpose (whatever that purpose may be) if it tolerates inconsistency or incoherence in its judgments across time. The problem can be understood more clearly if we consider what such wide-sweeping inconsistency and incoherency would look like at the individual level. If an individual continually adopted goals, beliefs, and so on, that conflicted with prior attitudes, or worse, she simply changed her views anytime there was a conflict of attitudes, we would begin to question her psychological health. Indeed, we would begin to question whether there is a unified subject -there at all.

perplexing, however, is the fact that the dilemma is not restricted to legal contexts. As Pettit (2001) points out, the dilemma will arise in any group that engages in deliberation and decision-making in the context of pursuing some goal or purpose. And just as the courts are frequently forced to collectivize reason and adopt the premise-driven approach, so too are these groups.[9]

Consider the following example. A committee of three has been formed to evaluate applications for admission and decide which applicants will be accepted into the philosophy program. The department has previously specified that admission decisions will be made based on the following four criteria: GREs, grades, letters of recommendation, and writing sample. If a committee member thinks that a candidate's application is very weak with respect to any of these criteria then they will vote against the candidate.[10] The committee members (labeled 1, 2, 3) consider each candidate and vote either "yes" or "no" depending on whether the candidate meets the criterion and then on whether they should be accepted into the program.

Consider these results for candidate A.

	Good GREs?	Good grades?	Good letters?	Good writing sample?	Accept?
1.	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
2.	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
3.	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

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9   Consider groups that must make a certain decision on the basis of criteria that have been determined by an outside agencies and authorities: admissions committees and promotions committees; committees that must decide the winner of a contest; trusts that have to make judgments based on a trustee's instructions; search committees that must obey standards of hiring set by administrators or other departments. In these cases there is always a possibility that there will be a conflict between rationality at the individual and collective level. If they adopt the *conclusion-driven approach* they run the risk of collectively endorsing inconsistent or incoherent sets of propositions. No group can continually endorse inconsistent or incoherent sets of propositions and continue to function properly and pursue its goals. They must, at times, adopt the *premise-driven approach* and seek consistency in their judgments as a group rather than as individuals.

10 I am simplifying the situation here. In most cases if a student is weak in one area but very strong in another he or she might gain acceptance but this depends on the committee. I am stipulating that the candidate cannot be very weak in any area and gain admissions. How weak is "very" weak is something to be determined by the members of the committee. Surely this is a plausible scenario.

In this scenario each individual thinks that candidate A should not be accepted yet if we consider how the individuals voted with respect to the criteria we see that a majority support each of the premises. There are two ways the committee might arrive at a decision concerning candidate A. They could base their decision solely on how the committee members voted with respect to the final question of acceptance and so the group decision regarding the question of candidate A's acceptance would be "no." But the committee could also let the views of the members on the premises determine the committee's decision regarding acceptance and then the group decision would by "yes."

These two choices correspond to standard group decision- making processes. The latter approach is followed when a committee engages in deliberation and then votes on one issue. The former approach is followed when a committee chair, for instance, tallies the votes made on independent issues and then lets logic determine what the group decision will be. When we aggregate the premise judgments, however, we get a different conclusion from that derived from aggregating the conclusion judgments. If we determine the group view by appealing to how members vote on the conclusion (*conclusion-driven approach*) then we ignore the fact that the premises are endorsed by a majority. The group decision would be inconsistent and would not cohere with the premises. If we determine the group decision by appealing to the premises (*premise-driven approach*) then we arrive at a group decision that no one individually supports.

Reflection on this social dilemma not only reveals how the norms of rationality apply at the collective level but it also strongly suggests that a group can have a rational point of view. When groups choose the *premise-driven approach* over the *conclusion-driven approach* they do so from a plural perspective. It is from this perspective that the *premise-driven approach* and its rationality become salient. If individuals continued to deliberate from their own individual perspectives they would not have reason to adopt a policy that is in conflict with their individual reasons. The paradox reveals that the third person plural concept, and not just the first person singular concept, can identify a unique subject of responsibility and power and it is a subject that is distinct from any of the individual subjects in the group.[11]

11   It has been suggested to me that individuals may opt for the premise-driven approach not because they adopt the rational perspective of the group but because they believe themselves to be poor decision makers and subject to irrationality and in order to avoid making a mistake they opt for the premise-driven approach. This may happen in some cases but it seems to me that it would be misleading to describe all of the cases like this. It is implausible to think, for instance, that the rationale for choosing the premise-driven approach in court cases is that the judges believe themselves to be bad reasoners. The choice of the premise-

Consider again the admissions committee. If the committee follows
the premise approach then the group will have reasons to accept a conclu-
sion that no individual, at least initially, has reason to accept. The reasons,
then, to accept the candidate, are reasons *for the group* but not reasons for
any individual. Attributions like "We believe that the candidate should be
admitted" cannot be reduced or replaced by a statement involving only the
I-concept. In our example no member of the committee believed the candi-
date should be admitted! The individuals in these cases have decided in ways
that conflict with what logic would dictate that the group ought to decide.
The reasons for accepting the candidate are not ones that have immediacy
for any particular individual. Instead, they have immediacy for the commit-
tee. This is the locus of power and responsibility for which these reasons have
immediacy.[12]

I argued in section I that an epistemic agent is a deliberator that is subject
to epistemic appraisal. Deliberation presupposes that an agent have a rational
point of view from which she can assess her attitudes and be moved to change
and alter those attitudes. Without a rational point of view we would not be
justified in holding a deliberator to the norms of rationality. The first person
singular concept marks this locus of power and responsibility. The social di-
lemma and its resolution strongly suggest that in certain cases the first person
plural concept or we-concept also marks a locus of power and responsibility.
This concept cannot be reduced to an aggregate of I-concepts. As we have seen
the attitudes of individuals may be discontinuous with the attitudes adopted by
the group. In certain cases we have reasons and these reasons have immediacy
for *us*. It is from the first person plural perspective that these reasons become
salient and it is this perspective that is presupposed in our epistemic assess-
ments of group attitudes and judgments. To the extent that certain groups

driven approach does not seem to be a mode of deference.

12   The fact that in these cases the locus of power and responsibility is the group rather than
     any particular individual is also revealed in our practice of holding groups epistemically
     responsible. We often assess the judgments and decisions of groups in everyday contexts.
     We hold groups accountable for their policies and require them to explain how certain deci-
     sions cohere with past decisions. In doing so we are not asking individuals to justify their
     own beliefs and judgments. Indeed, the distinction between one's personal beliefs and the
     beliefs of the group to which she belongs is often marked by phrases like "Personally, I don't
     believe X, but it is what the committee has decided." This distancing of oneself from the
     group decision is a way of shifting the locus of power and responsibility from oneself to the
     group.

have a rational point of view and are subject to the norms of rationality, certain groups are epistemic agents.[13]

III

Epistemic agent individualism has recently been challenged by some feminist epistemologists. Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990), for instance, has argued that social units or communities are the *primary* epistemic agents. Individuals, if they have knowledge at all, have it in a derivative sense. According to Nelson, contemporary epistemologists must shift their focus from the individual to the social group. Does the thesis I develop in this paper support such a strong claim? I have argued that certain groups can *sometimes* be epistemic agents. This is a much weaker claim. But reflection on the social dilemma also suggests that there are certain contexts in which collective epistemic agency is primary.

One way to see this is by considering an objection to the line of reasoning I develop in section II. Recall the admissions committee example. If no individual thinks that the candidate should be admitted then the collective process of deliberation is fundamentally flawed. It will yield a conclusion that is not consistent with those reached by any of the individuals who constitute the group. If the collective outcome is rational for no one involved in the process then why should collective deliberation be considered a rational activity? And hence, why should these groups be considered epistemic agents?[14]

It should be noted that although adopting the premise-driven approach will lead, in some cases, to the adoption of a conclusion that no individual personally believes, this does not mean that it would be irrational for the individuals

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13   The idea that groups have beliefs is obviously presupposed by a discussion of collective epistemic agency. If groups are not believers then they are obviously not epistemic agents. I have argued elsewhere (2002a, 2002b) that groups are literally intentional agents. They literally have beliefs, intentions, and desires. But my discussion in this paper does not presuppose this strong thesis. Indeed, the thesis of this paper is consistent with the individualistic accounts of group belief developed by Gilbert (1988), and Tuomela (1995). On these accounts group beliefs are identified with some set of individual intentional states. The thesis of this paper is, however, inconsistent with summative accounts of group belief. On these accounts a group G believes that p if and only if all or most of the members believe that p. As the social dilemma shows, there will often be a discontinuity between what each member believes and what the group belief is. Thus, the social dilemma reveals the inadequacies of the summative accounts. See Quinton (1975) for an example of a summative approach to group belief.

14   Thanks to Alison Wylie for bringing this objection to my attention.

to adopt the premise-driven approach. Each individual will recognize that the group has certain goals and that in order to achieve those goals they must sustain a certain level of consistency in their judgments across time. Therefore each individual will have a reason to accept the conclusion that is arrived at through the premise-driven approach. It is important to note, however that these reasons become reasons for an individual only after one recognizes that the group has reasons to adopt a certain conclusion. Thus, whatever reason an individual might have to accept a decision that goes against their personal opinion on the matter is parasitic on the group's reasons. It is only when individuals recognize that "we" will be adopting a policy or decision that is inconsistent with prior or present commitments that they may come to see themselves as having reasons to accept a conclusion they do not personally endorse.[15]

So perhaps this is the sense in which collective epistemic agents have a sort of primacy. The reasons we have as individuals might ultimately derive in some contexts from group reasons. [16] If individual rationality is influenced by considerations of collective rationality, then there is a sense in which collective epistemic agency is primary and, therefore, individual knowledge will *sometimes* be derivative.

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15 It may, in fact, lead them to reconsider their previous votes and to try to bring their personal opinions in line with the dictates of reason at the collective level. But again, all of this occurs after the recognition that there are reasons that have force for them as a group.

16 This idea has been developed more fully in certain discussions of practical rationality. In *Natural Reasons* (1989) Susan Hurley argues that much of the history of thinking about rational choice and practical rationality presupposes individualism about agency. Individualism about agency is the view that "the rationality of an act is determined by the causal consequences of that individual act only, rather than by the causal consequences of any collective act of which it may be a part."(1989, 151) Hurley argues quite persuasively that individualism about agency is mistaken. In order to explain the rationality and the irrationality of certain acts we must acknowledge the unit of agency is not fixed. Consider the case of voting. An individual may recognize that their own vote will not affect the outcome of an election nor will it cause others to vote. Even if it did have some minimal effect, the costs of voting would far outweigh these effects. How do we explain, then, why individuals should and do vote? The individualist about agency would have to argue that it is irrational for individuals to vote. Hurley points out, however, that if we allow that the unit of agency can be an individual or a group the rationality of voting becomes apparent. It is only when one conceives of the unit of agency as fixed that the issue of the irrationality of voting arises. When we allow the unit of agency to be the group rather than the individual and assess rationality from the perspective of the group, the rationality of individual agents becomes apparent.

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Who knows? I have suggested that the answer to this question is sometimes "we do!" Further, there is a sense in which epistemic agency can be primary. There will be certain times when individual rationality must be assessed in terms of collective rationality. This does not mean, however, that individuals have knowledge only when the community to which they belong has knowledge. And thus, it does not mean, as Nelson suggests, that contemporary epistemology must shift its focus entirely to groups. The thesis I develop here suggests that contemporary analytic epistemology should broaden its focus to include collective epistemic agents. This is not only because groups are, at times, legitimate epistemic agents but because, as we have seen, there is a sense in which individual rationality is influenced by collective rationality.

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Deborah Perron Tollefsen
Assistant Professor
Directory of Graduate Studies
Department of Philosophy
University of Memphis TN 38152
USA