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Comments on Hiller and Randall's "Epistemic Structure in Non-Summative Social Knowledge"

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In “Epistemic Structure in Non-Summative Social Knowledge” (2022), Avram Hiller and R. Wolfe Randall argue that not only is not all group knowledge summative, the knowledge that groups have also fails to supervene on mental states of their members. That is, a group G can know that p even in a case where not a single member of G is aware that p . However, the paper does not dispute the supervenience of the goals and functions of groups on the minds of at least some of their members, nor that knowledge of groups is determined by their structure. I very much agree, as argued in my “Nonreductive Group Knowledge Revisited” (2022), that group structure, as well as group function and aims, are central to group knowledge.

The starting point is Alexander Bird’s (2010; 2014) notion of a social knower, where the following structural requirements must be in place for, say, an entire scientific community, to possess social knowledge:

- (i) They have characteristic outputs that are propositional in nature.
- (ii) They have characteristic mechanisms whose function is to ensure or promote the chances that the outputs in (i) are true.
- (iii) The outputs in (i) are the inputs for (a) social actions or for (b) social cognitive structures.

Following Jennifer Lackey (2020) we can then say that a social structure S socially knows that p if and only if (1) p is true, (2) S satisfies (i) – (iii), and (3) the information that p is accessible to the members of S who need it.

Hiller and Randall proceed by defending such a “non-summative non-supervenient account” (NSNS) of group knowledge against two of Jennifer Lackey’s (op. cit.) objections to Bird’s account to do with (i) the connection between knowledge and action, and (ii) accessibility to p . Lackey offers the following illustrative case.

MISSING CHILD

Suppose that three police officers all work for the same unit of the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

Officer A knows (1): that a seven-year-old child, Jimmy Smith, has been reported missing from the Rogers Park neighbourhood of the city since this morning. He knows this because it was communicated to him by his superior.

Officer B knows (2): that Jimmy Smith was wearing a Frida Kahlo t-shirt this morning because he lives next door to the Smith family, and he remembers commenting on how he loves Frida Kahlo’s work when he saw Jimmy walk out of the house.

And Officer C knows (3) that he saw a seven-year-old wearing a Frida Kahlo *t*-shirt walking with an adult man while he was patrolling a park in Edgewater, the neighbourhood just south of Rogers Park.

Officer A knows only (1), but not (2) or (3);

Officer B knows only (2), but not (1) or (3); and

Officer C knows only (3), but not (1) or (2).

Thus, the CPD knows (1), (2), and (3), even though no single police officer knows this.

Since (1), (2) and (3) together entail:

(4) There is a high likelihood that Jimmy Smith is the boy seen walking in Rogers Park—

Lackey takes Bird's account of social knowledge to imply that the CPD knows (4) on the basis of knowing (1), (2) and (3), yet (MISSING CHILD) elicits the intuition that no single member should be held accountable for not acting on (4). The case thus allegedly proves that Bird's account cannot distinguish between cases in which *S* knows that *p* and cases in which *S* should have known that *p*.

Hiller and Randall's Response

Hiller and Randall propose that (ii) be amended to require that *G* knows that *p* only when (a) *p* is such that *G*'s structure is designed to access information of the general type of which *p* is a token and (b) *G*'s epistemic structure is in fact functioning properly. We are asked to imagine that each officer of this unit of the Chicago Police Department (CPD) instead submit their respective proposition to a centralized system such that when all the information is collated, a light goes on and a print-out is made. It is still the case that no single officer knows any of (1) – (4), but since every officer now has very easy access to (4) via the automated print-out, it's intuitive to hold the group accountable for failing to act on (4).

Hiller and Randall call this tweaked case (MISSING CHILD*). The extra conditions that the non-summative non-supervenient account (NSNS) adds to Bird's approach are designed to emphasise the importance for group knowledge of the means to process relevant information, where such means may consist in an automated system rather than any (operative) members going through some cognitive process. Hence, supervenience of group knowledge on mental states of such members fails; or so the claim is.

But while the CPD in (MISSING CHILD*) arguably should be held accountable for not acting on (4), that may be because this group should have known (4) given that (a) and (b) are satisfied, as per above. After all, in this modified case, it seems right that all (or enough) of its officers should have known (4). But it isn't clear why exactly the CPD does in fact know (4). Knowledge entails belief, and so any account of knowledge must respect the three-way distinction between occurrent belief, dispositional belief, and disposition to believe.

As Robert Audi (1994), David Rose and Jonathan Schaffer (2013), and others have argued, dispositional belief is what knowledge entails, which consists in having information readily available for endorsement. No occurrent belief is required; in fact, no prior such belief is strictly needed. What matters for dispositional belief is that the proposition be preserved in

memory from which it can effortlessly be recovered for active deployment in reasoning or planning. Now, NSNS may insist that since (4) is saved in the automated, centralised system from which that information is readily accessible, the CPD does dispositionally believe (4), but that would require that such non-biological repository serves as a functional analogue of the way individuals store and retrieve information in their biological memory.

At this juncture, a natural thought would be that the dispositional belief in (4) consists in an extended cognitive process at the group level. This proposal is briefly considered, but not adopted, in the last section of the paper. The worry is supposedly that the individuals would be saddled with an “overlap of mentation”, but that seems unfounded as there is no question of any individual dispositionally believing (4). None of them are even able to infer (4) from (1), (2) and (3). In any case, if extended cognition is deemed a non-starter, we need some other explanation of how the CPD can be said to dispositionally believe (4). Otherwise, even (MISSING CHILD*) would at best illustrate that the CPD has a disposition to believe (4), i.e., that (4) is information which would be endorsed, were it available through a process of belief formation. So, NSNS owes an account of how satisfying (a) and (b) makes the difference between a disposition to believe and a dispositional belief, seeing that (MISSING CHILD*) is a case of knowledge but (MISSING CHILD) is not, and the only difference between them is whether those two conditions are met.

Note

The AHRC-funded *Digital Knowledge* project is now underway. The aim is to explore a number of interconnected topics and questions in the epistemology of the internet, virtue/vice epistemology and notions of extended and digital knowledge. The project team comprises Adam Carter (PI), Jesper Kallestrup (Co-I), Giada Fratantonio (post doc), Josh Thorpe (post doc) and Edoardo Cavasin (PhD student). For more information about the project, and for updates about upcoming events, project outputs, contact details, etc., see our website <https://www.digital-knowledge.org>.

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