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Regarding Dispositional Belief: A Further Reply to Hiller and Randall

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In my reply (2023) to Hiller and Randall (2023a), I suggested that since dispositional belief is arguably what knowledge in general requires, their (NSNS) view of group knowledge should account for how groups dispositionally believe p , as opposed to having a disposition to believe p and to occurrently believing p . Their interesting reply (2023b) is to espouse pluralism about group belief (and knowledge): different groups can be said to dispositionally believe p in virtue of different facts about how they possess and utilise p in reasoning, planning and action, including in virtue of dispositional beliefs of one or more group members.

But what unifies all groups vis-à-vis dispositional belief is that they be “able to possess and use the information, in at least some relevant contexts, *in accord with the way the group is structured to possess and use the information.*” Likewise, Hiller and Randall say that group knowledge requires “an epistemic structure that is designed to possess and process knowledge of the relevant sort, and it is functioning properly in accord with that structure, and this may be realized in many different ways” (2023b, 41).

The Demands of Dispositional Belief

Dispositional belief is more demanding than a disposition to believe. I am disposed to believe everything Wikipedia tells me, but I don’t dispositionally believe all those propositions. There are very many propositions in Wikipedia which I have never considered, let alone endorsed, but were I to look them up, using my smartphone, I probably would accept them (in the absence of countervailing evidence). The worry is, in the absence of such a distinction, and if we assume that those propositions are both true and supported by sufficient evidence, I too easily end up being ascribed far too much knowledge. For if having a disposition to believe is what knowledge requires, then it looks as if I know all those propositions before being even aware of any of them. A similar *epistemic explosion* worry would arise at the group-level if such a distinction is unavailable to block it.

So, let’s dwell on a similar case involving groups. Imagine the Wikipedia Society as a group of students whose structure is designed to access and store information from Wikipedia through some technical device used by the group. Their joint aim is simply to amass as much information from Wikipedia as possible. Whenever (a significant number of operative) members access some information p from Wikipedia via the device, presumably the Society itself can be said to know p , if p is true and sufficiently evidentially supported. So, the Society dispositionally believes p in virtue of dispositional beliefs of its individual members. But why doesn’t it follow by the lights of (NSNS) that the Society knows *all* the true and evidentially supported information in Wikipedia, including information not even considered by any of its members?

Given that Hiller and Randall (op. cit.) hold that in MISSING CHILD*, “the printout itself *constitutes* the knowledge of the group”, we can add, if you like, that this powerful device has not only saved but also automatically printed off all this information. The question is pressing because the Society is functioning properly in accordance with the way it is

structured to collate or gather information from Wikipedia. And (NSNS) has is that group knowledge fails to supervene on individual mental states; in fact, on this view, not even individual accessibility is needed for group knowledge. But surely, while the Society is disposed to believe all those propositions, it doesn't know them.

Accounting for Group Knowledge

One may object that in the example of the Wikipedia Society the envisaged information isn't being "used" or "processed" in the right way required for group knowledge. In contrast, the extra conditions that Hiller and Randall add to Bird's (2010; 2014) account of group knowledge to ensure the availability of the *means* to process relevant information are supposedly satisfied in MISSING CHILD*. But, as that case also illustrates, those means may consist in automated systems processing data rather than any (operative) members going through some cognitive deliberations or inferential reasoning. And in the case of our Society, there is also proper automated processing taking place in that the device accesses, stores and prints huge amounts of information.

The difference is that only in MISSING CHILD* does the automated system infer a proposition, which the group is then said to know, on the basis of distinct propositional inputs from its members. But that should not be held against the Society whose goal is merely to accumulate as much Wikipedia information as possible. Of course, at this juncture Hiller and Randall may just bite the bullet and insist that the Society does indeed know all those many propositions, but then at least we are owed an explanation of why that is less counterintuitive than in the abovementioned individual case, or else of how that intuition can be explained away.

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