

# Group beliefs and the distinction between belief and acceptance

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## Abstract

Group beliefs, or collective doxastic states, are states analogous to beliefs but attributed to groups instead of individuals. In this paper, existing views on the nature of certain types of group beliefs, non-summative group beliefs, are critically examined. Some authors state that they are beliefs, others say that they are not beliefs but acceptances. It is here argued that the distinction between belief and acceptance is not as clear-cut as usually assumed. A common view is that the main difference between the two notions is that beliefs are based solely on evidence, whereas acceptances are affected by pragmatic goals. It is argued that this will not distinguish beliefs from acceptances, because both attitudes can be affected by both evidence on the one hand and goals on the other. It is suggested that the possibility to voluntarily acquire, abandon, or otherwise directly affect the attitude should be taken as the property that distinguishes acceptances from other doxastic states. The question of the nature of group beliefs can then be partially answered by considering whether these states can be taken to be voluntary or not. It has sometimes been claimed that group beliefs are not voluntary for the group but only for the individual group members. It is here argued that non-summative group beliefs should be understood as being voluntary for the group and should thus be classified as acceptances. Whether they should also be regarded as proper beliefs depends on whether the distinction is taken to be dichotomous or not.

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## 1. Introduction

Attributions of belief and knowledge to groups or collections of people instead of individuals are common in ordinary use of language, as in the following examples: “the government believes that the number of unemployed will be halved in the near future” or “the scientists know that the Earth is not flat”. What these kinds of attributions literally mean has been under analysis by several philosophers. There are two types of analyses available in the literature concerning collective intentionality: *summative* and *non-summative*. For a typical summative view, consider Quinton’s (1976) proposal:

Groups are said to have beliefs, emotions and attitudes and to take decisions and make promises. But these

ways of speaking are plainly metaphorical. To ascribe mental predicates to a group is always an indirect way of ascribing such predicates to its members. With such mental states as beliefs and attitudes the ascriptions are of what I have called a summative kind. To say that the industrial working class is determined to resist anti-trade-union laws is to say that all or most industrial workers are so minded.

Restricting to the case of belief, to say that a group believes that  $p$  means, according to a summative view, just that the members of the group believe that  $p$ . Different summative analyses can be constructed depending on whether *all* group members have to believe that  $p$ , or whether it suffices that *most* of the members believe that  $p$ , or whether it is required that most of the members believe that  $p$  and that they also believe that most believe that  $p$ , or something similar.

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What is common to all of these summative accounts is that according to them, a group belief is taken to be a function of the beliefs of the individual members of the group in question. These views are reductionist in the sense that they reduce group beliefs to individual beliefs instead of giving group beliefs an independent ontological status. Thus, according to these views, there are no group beliefs or collective beliefs as such; instead, attributions of beliefs to groups are just convenient shorthand expressions that really refer to certain combinations of individual beliefs.

However, it has been shown by Gilbert (1987) that there is an important sense of group belief which is not amenable to a summative analysis. Even if some actual utterances about group beliefs were just shorthand expressions referring to multiple individual beliefs, at least in some cases, especially when beliefs are attributed to structured groups like teams, countries, or organizations, as opposed to mere collections of people, the belief attributions do not refer to combinations of individual beliefs but rather to something like an agreement of the view of the group. For example, it can be said that the government believes that the number of unemployed will be halved in the near future merely on the basis that the members of the government have agreed to take it as the view of the government, independently of whether the individual members of the government happen to personally believe it.

For a group belief that  $p$ , in this kind of a non-summative, agreement-based sense, it is not a sufficient condition that the group members believe that  $p$ , and, indeed, it is not even necessary that any of them believe that  $p$ . Instead, it is required that they together agree that *as a group* they believe that  $p$ . Exact analyses of non-summative group beliefs are offered by Gilbert (1987) and Tuomela (1995, Chapter 7). In this paper, an exact analysis is not needed; it suffices to say that a group belief that  $p$  requires an intentional act of the group members jointly to take  $p$  as the view of the group. How this group view is formed in practice varies from group to group, but it usually involves at least some such elements as discussion, argumentation, making compromises, voting etc. Making this kind of a group agreement is often taken to create some sort of a collective commitment for the group members to treat  $p$  as a premiss in their theoretical and practical reasoning when acting as group members.

Since these kinds of group views are often called group beliefs in natural language utterances, the question has been raised whether they really are beliefs or whether these belief attributions are just metaphorical expressions. In other words, one may ask whether groups really can correctly be said to have beliefs that are (1) beliefs in the same sense as beliefs in the case of individual people and (2) non-summative, that is, independent of or discontinuous with the individual group members' beliefs, as explained above.

Currently, there are two competing views concerning the nature of these non-summative group beliefs. According to the so-called *rejectionist* view (Meijers, 2002; Wray, 2001), group beliefs are not really beliefs, but *acceptances*, which

are taken to differ from beliefs in certain respects (see e.g., Cohen, 1992; Clarke, 1994). On the other hand, the competing side (Gilbert, 2002; Tollefsen, 2003), referred to as the *believers* by Tollefsen (2003), holds that group beliefs really are beliefs rather than acceptances. In this paper, I will examine the proposed distinction between belief and acceptance, present my view on what is the main difference between these two notions, and consider the status of non-summative collective doxastic states, usually called group beliefs, with respect to this distinction.

In Section 2, I will recall the distinction between belief and acceptance and discuss the suggested differences between the two kinds of doxastic states. Actually, several different distinctions have been made but there seems to be a general agreement on the rough outline of the division made in the discussions concerning group beliefs.

In Section 3, I will review some of the arguments presented for and against the claim that group beliefs are proper beliefs. I will show that in the recent debates it has been assumed that the main difference between acceptance and proper belief is that acceptance to some extent depends on pragmatic goals whereas belief only depends on evidence. I claim that this concentration on goal-dependence does not shed much light to the issue because goal-dependence does not properly distinguish belief from acceptance.

I will then reconsider the distinction between belief and acceptance in Section 4. I will try to find out which properties could serve as a proper basis for the distinction. Based on these considerations, I suggest that the distinction between belief and acceptance should be based on just one property, namely on voluntariness.

In Section 5, I will study whether collective beliefs or group beliefs are really beliefs. It is usually admitted that collectives can have beliefs in the summative sense (see e.g., Tuomela, 2000; Meijers, 2002), although in that case the collective in question is not viewed as a structured group with a group's view (as in "the government"), but rather as an aggregate collection of individuals (as in "the scientists"), and the collective belief is constituted by the beliefs of the individuals. I agree that there certainly is an important summative sense of collective beliefs, but in this paper, the type of collective belief that I am concerned with is a non-summative, agreement-based view addressed to a structured group. Thus, I will here use the term "group belief" of the concept under study to distinguish it from the more general notion of "collective belief".<sup>1</sup> I will argue that group beliefs are under voluntary control of the group members, and thus the group itself,

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert (2002) cautiously uses the term "collective belief", which will also appear in my quotations from her writings. The reason I use the term "group belief" instead of a more neutral term like "group belief" or "collective doxastic state" is that people talk about group beliefs and not group beliefs or collective doxastic states, and, consequently, I take the concept of group belief to be the analysandum in this paper. It should be understood that by calling the phenomenon under study "group belief" I am not thereby committed to the view that the phenomenon in question is a case of belief.

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