

Against individualistic accounts of group belief

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Abstract: We often ascribe beliefs to groups, institutions, companies and similar social entities, and many philosophers inquire into the nature of such beliefs. While different accounts have been proposed, many agree that group belief should be analysed in terms of the behaviour and the attitudes of the group's members. In this paper, I raise a principled worry against such individualistic accounts of group belief. The basic concern is that individualistic accounts of group belief cannot be squared with existing accounts of the nature of belief from the philosophy of mind, such as dispositionalism and functionalism. My focus will be on group belief, but parallel concerns can be raised for individualistic accounts of group justified belief, group knowledge and group assertion.

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1 Introduction

We readily ascribe beliefs to groups:

- (1) VW believes that it can catch up to Tesla.
- (2) Amazon believed that diversity and inclusion are good for business.

Many philosophers analyse group belief in terms of the attitudes or behaviours of individual members of the relevant group (e.g. Gilbert 1987; Tuomela 1992; Lackey 2021).¹ According to the most basic account, a group believes something iff all its members do. More sophisticated views focus, for instance, on the beliefs of operative members only or on what they accept rather than believe. These accounts promise a tractable reduction: questions about group belief reduce to familiar questions about individual psychology.

In this paper, I raise a principled objection to all accounts that analyse group belief in terms of the attitudes and behaviour of a group's members. The basic concern is that such accounts cannot be squared with existing accounts of the nature of belief—such as dispositionalism and functionalism—that have been proposed in the philosophy of mind. In section 2, I clarify the type of account I aim to reject before I present my argument in section 3. In sections 4, 5 and 6, I defend the premises of this argument. I conclude in section 7.

While I will focus exclusively on group belief in this paper, it should become obvious that analogous arguments could be raised in the debates on the nature of group justified belief, group knowledge and group assertion. In each of these debates, various proposals have been made to analyse the respective group states in terms of the attitudes and behaviour of the group's members (see e.g. Lackey 2021 for the state of the art in each of these debates). In each case, these analyses clash with independently proposed analyses of justification, knowledge and assertion in the way to be presented below.

¹ I focus in this paper on organized groups denoted by expressions such as 'Amazon' and 'VW' and the nature of their beliefs. I thus leave aside sentences ascribing beliefs to simple pluralities (e.g. sets or mereological sums) of people, as denoted by expressions like 'the professors', 'professors', 'Hannah and Mary', 'we' and 'the team'. The latter sentences might be easily amenable to quantificational analyses along the lines of the literature on distributivity in linguistics (see e.g. Ludwig 2007: 365–6, as well as Champollion 2019 and de Vries 2021 for more recent overviews of the relevant linguistics literature and Križ 2016 on the 'non-maximality' of the relevant quantifier). Ludwig (2017: 290) argues, in my view convincingly, that belief ascriptions to organized groups cannot be analysed in the same way.

2 Individualistic accounts

Many authors on group belief favour what I will call individualistic accounts of group belief. The aim of this paper is to show that all such accounts are mistaken. In this section, I begin by clarifying what individualistic accounts are.

Individualistic accounts of group belief are paradigmatically exemplified by the following prominent positions:

Summative Account. A group G believes that p if and only if all/most/some members of G believe that p .²

Operative Belief Account. ‘A group, G , believes that p if and only if: (1) there is a significant percentage of G ’s operative members who believe p and (2) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that p yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent.’ (Lackey 2021: 48–9)

Joint Commitment Account. A group G believes that p if and only if ‘it is common knowledge in G that the individual members in G have openly expressed a conditional commitment jointly to accept that p together with the other members of G .’ (Gilbert 1987: 195; see also Schmitt 1994: 262; de Ridder 2022; Schwengerer 2022)

Operative Acceptance Account. ‘For a group agent G to believe P *just is* for (i) operative members to accept P *qua members* because P is the output of an aggregation rule members agreed (maybe implicitly) to use, where (ii) because of (i), non-operative members at least tacitly accept P *qua members*, and (iii) the truth of (i–ii) is common knowledge among members, in the sense of Lewis (1969).’ (Sylvan 2012: 277; following Tuomela 1992)

The first two accounts analyse group belief in terms of the group members’ beliefs, whereas the

² See e.g. Gilbert 1987: 187–9 for discussion. Versions of the Summative Account are frequently attributed to Quinton (1976: 17), but he does not think that group belief ascriptions are ever true. He only addresses what we mean when we (falsely) attribute beliefs to groups (likewise for Cohen 1992: 53). As far as I can see, the status of the Summative Account is much like the status of the JTB analysis of knowledge. It is a useful starting point that everybody rejects.

latter two invoke non-doxastic states such as commitment or acceptance (see e.g. Cohen 1992 on the notion of acceptance). In each pair, one account focuses on all members of the group while the other focuses only on the operative members, i.e. members with relevant decision-making authority.

Despite these differences, all four accounts analyse group belief in terms of a unified description of the behaviour or the attitudes of the group's members. This, I take it, is the hallmark of *individualistic accounts*. Individualistic accounts of group belief therefore contrast primarily with what I call *collective accounts*, which analyse group belief without appealing to the behaviour or attitudes of group members. The most common forms of collective accounts are functionalist or interpretivist: a group believes something when it occupies the functional role of belief or when its behaviour is best explained by attributing that belief to it (e.g. Clark 1994; Bird 2010, 2014; List & Pettit 2011; Hess 2014; Tollefsen 2015; Collins 2023; Brown 2023, 2024). But collective accounts could also be developed based on other general theories of belief, such as dispositionalism.

Three clarifications. First, individualistic accounts go beyond the mere claim that group beliefs supervene on individual attitudes and behaviour. Collectivists may grant this assumption as well, and indeed it seems difficult to dispute (e.g. List & Pettit 2011: 64–6). What individualists add primarily is that group belief can be given a unified analysis in terms of individual attitudes and behaviour. Analogously, even if one accepts that individual beliefs supervene on brain states, it is an additional (quite controversial) step to assume that they admit of a unified analysis in those terms. (Furthermore, individualistic accounts restrict their attention to the attitudes and behaviour of the group's members, while the supervenience claim allows that group beliefs can depend on non-members.)

Second, I assume that the kind of analysis at issue is a standard philosophical analysis, that is, an analysis of the sort familiar from debates about the nature of knowledge (see e.g. Horvath 2018

on what such analyses involve). This interpretation of individualistic accounts fits with the widespread use of intuitive counterexamples in the debate, the common practice of formulating such accounts as biconditionals and the stated aims of their leading proponents. Gilbert (1987: 185), for instance, asks ‘what is a collective belief?’, and Lackey (2021: 20) investigates the ‘nature of group belief’. When posed by philosophers, questions of this form typically aim at standard philosophical analyses (compare ‘What is knowledge?’ or ‘What is the nature of knowledge?’). When I speak of analysis in what follows, I will have this kind of analysis in mind, and I will continue to represent it with biconditionals.

Third, the distinction between individualistic and collective accounts of group belief cuts across the more familiar distinction between summative and non-summative (or reductive and non-reductive) accounts. According to summative accounts, group belief ascriptions are mere summaries of belief ascriptions to the group’s members, while according to non-summative accounts, they are not (e.g. Graf & Dang 2025: 2). While all summative accounts are therefore individualistic, only some non-summative accounts qualify as collective. For example, the Joint Commitment Account and the Operative Acceptance Account are non-summative yet still individualistic.

3 An argument against individualistic accounts

I think there is a general argument showing that all individualistic accounts of group belief are mistaken. In this section, I state this argument and motivate its premises. I defend those premises in detail in the rest of the paper.

To start, the following analysis of group belief seems hardly dubitable:

Conjunctive Analysis. x has a group belief that p iff x is a group and x believes that p .

This analysis says that a group belief is a belief held by a group, and what else could it be? Suppose this analysis is correct. Then it seems that any correct analysis of group belief must result from inserting correct analyses of being a group and/or having a belief into this analysis. To see this, suppose we seek an analysis of being a rich aunt. Since a rich aunt is just someone who is

both rich and an aunt, any correct analysis of that notion should arise from conjoining correct analyses of being rich and being an aunt. For example, one such analysis might be: having a lot of money (i.e. being rich) and being the sister of one of one's parents (i.e. being an aunt). Analogously, if having a group belief is being a group and having a belief, then any correct analysis of group belief must be constructed by combining correct analyses of those two components.

Now suppose that some familiar analysis of belief from the philosophy of mind is correct. Then it follows that any correct analysis of group belief is collective, not individualistic. Consider, for instance, the following analysis of belief:

Reasoning Disposition Analysis (RDA). x believes that p iff x is disposed to treat p as true in its reasoning (e.g. Ross & Schroeder 2014).

If we insert this analysis into the Conjunctive Analysis, we get:

Conjunctive Analysis*. x has a group belief that p iff x is a group and x is disposed to treat p as true in its reasoning.

This analysis is collective, not individualistic. The same goes if we insert other familiar analyses of belief into the Conjunctive Analysis, such as other forms of dispositionalism, functionalism or interpretivism.

We do not arrive at an individualistic account either by further analysing the notions that appear in the indicated analyses of belief. Consider, for example, the following analyses of having a disposition and of treating something as true:

x is disposed to ϕ iff x ϕ s under suitable circumstances (see e.g. Manley & Wasserman 2008 for pertinent discussion).

x treats p as true in their reasoning iff x evaluates their alternatives by the same procedure by which they would evaluate them conditional on p (e.g. Ross & Schroeder 2014: 264).

If we insert these analyses into the Conjunctive Analysis*, the result is still a collective account of group belief. And this does not change if we further analyse the notions appearing in the just

indicated analyses.

Nor do we obtain an individualistic account by inserting an analysis of being a group. Consider, for instance:

x is a group iff x realizes a social structure (e.g. Ritchie 2013, 2020).

If we insert this analysis into the Conjunctive Analysis*, we arrive at the following:

Conjunctive Analysis.** x has a group belief that p iff x realizes a social structure and x is disposed to treat p as true in its reasoning.

Perhaps realizing a social structure can be analysed in terms of having members with certain features. Still, the resulting analysis will not be fully individualistic, because the reasoning disposition is attributed to the group as a whole rather than to its members.

We would arrive at an individualistic account of group belief if we analysed belief in terms of the right-hand side of some familiar individualistic account. Consider, for example, the following analysis:

x believes that p iff (1) there is a significant percentage of x's operative members who believe p and (2) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that p yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent.

If we insert this analysis into the Conjunctive Analysis, we obtain the Operative Belief Account. But the proposed analysis of belief is not a familiar one. Moreover, it is clearly false: it entails that individuals cannot have beliefs, simply because they lack members who could possess beliefs. The same problem arises for any attempt to analyse belief using the right-hand side of an individualistic account. Each such analysis requires having members, and individuals never meet that requirement.³

³ One might suggest that individuals are groups with a single member. But, first, they are not: sentences like 'Jones has one member' are plainly false. Second, even granting the indicated assumption, individualistic accounts still don't yield

In sum, assuming the Conjunctive Analysis, all correct analyses of group belief must result from inserting correct analyses of being a group and/or having a belief into this analysis. Assuming further that some familiar analysis of belief is correct, all analyses that result from this procedure are collective, not individualistic. So, no individualistic account is correct. Here is the argument in a nutshell:

Anti-Individualistic Argument

(P1) The Conjunctive Analysis is correct.

(P2) Some familiar analysis of belief is correct.

(P3) If (P1) and (P2), then no individualistic account of group belief is correct.

∴ No individualistic account of group belief is correct.⁴

As stated, the argument is valid. In the rest of this paper, I show that it is sound too. To do so, I consider and reject several ways to challenge its premises.

plausible analyses of belief (setting the Summative Account aside). For, individual belief requires neither a coherent basis, nor the public expression of a commitment, nor higher-order knowledge of having accepted a relevant proposition.

⁴ A reviewer worries that this conclusion is at odds with the obvious truth that group action requires actions by the group's members (or proxy members) (e.g. List & Pettit 2011: 64; Lackey 2021: 116). However, first, this claim follows already if group actions supervene on member actions, and as indicated, one can accept this supervenience claim while still denying analysability. Second, the group action principle doesn't appear obviously correct if we focus on organized groups such as companies. In particular, it is not obvious that the actions of such groups always result from *member* actions. Consider a science-fiction scenario in which a wealthy donor creates a company appointing clones, still in cryostasis, to all positions, while not taking any role themselves in the company. Wanting transparency, the donor sets up an automated system that regularly publishes the company's business numbers; for example, a bot that posts them to a public website. Assume the bot releases the first set of numbers before any of the clones have woken up. In that case, the company appears to have reported its business numbers for the first time and thus to have acted, even though none of its members, and no proxy, has ever taken any action.

4 Ambiguity

In this section, I consider and reject the most promising strategy to challenge (P1). Consider the term ‘bank’, which ambiguously denotes financial institutions, banks_f , or the border area of, e.g. a river, banks_r . To disambiguate, we can speak of ‘financial banks’ and ‘river banks’. Contrary to superficial appearance, these expressions denote banks_f or banks_r rather than a species of some overarching kind *bank*. Analogously, so the argument goes, the term ‘belief’ is ambiguous, and has both an individual and a group reading, belief_i and belief_g . Correspondingly, the term ‘group belief’ denotes belief_g rather than a species of some overarching kind *belief*. The Conjunctive Analysis is therefore false, contrary to (P1). Meijers (2003: 387) subscribes to similar ideas when he writes that ‘ordinary language misleads us in suggesting that the notion of belief in “collective belief” and “individual belief” is the same notion’ (see also Ludwig 2017: 294).

This response faces significant difficulties, not least considering Grice’s (1989: 47) dictum that ‘senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity’ (see the discussion of metaphor below). More importantly, however, the term ‘belief’ fails established linguistic tests for ambiguity (see Zwicky & Sadock 1975, for seminal discussion).

Consider first what I will call the ‘Contradiction Test’. According to this test, when a term is ambiguous, we can use it to form superficially contradictory and yet felicitous conjunctions, as in the following examples:

- (3) The telephone is working, but it isn’t *working*.
- (4) Jones drove the cattle, but she didn’t *drive* the cattle.
- (5) I see that you are leaving the office, but I don’t *see* that you are leaving the office.

Each of these sentences can be heard as fine given the functioning vs. labouring ambiguity of ‘work’, the herding vs. vehicle-driving ambiguity of ‘drive’ and the visually seeing vs. understanding ambiguity of ‘see’. Contrast this with the following sentence:

- (6) # Jones believes that it is raining, but she doesn’t *believe* that it is raining.

Even with the indicated emphasis, this sentence sounds contradictory, and this suggests that ‘belief’ is not ambiguous. One might respond that individuals, by their nature, cannot have beliefs_g and that the group reading is unavailable in (6) for this reason. But this cannot be the full story. It is in the nature of a telephone that it cannot go to work, and yet there is a felicitous reading of sentence (3).

Second, consider what I will call the ‘VP-Ellipsis Test’. When an expression is ambiguous, we can form funny (or ‘zeugmatic’) conjunctions by eliding a verb phrase containing this expression. The following examples bring this out:

The caretaker is at work, and the telephone is functioning.

(7) ? The caretaker is working, and so is the telephone.

Jones herded the cattle, and I drove them in a truck.

(8) ? Jones drove the cattle, and so did I.

Jones visually saw you leaving while I was only told.

(9) ? Jones saw that you were leaving the office, and so did I.

Once more, this contrasts with the case of ‘belief’, where similar constructions do not sound funny at all (or at least much less funny than the earlier sentences):

VW believes_g that it can catch up to Tesla, and I believe_i this.

(10) VW believes that it can catch up to Tesla, and so do I.

One might respond that the indicated tests only work for truly ambiguous terms like ‘bank’ but not for so-called polysemous terms, which have different but closely related readings. The term ‘book’, for instance, is polysemous between a reading denoting physical copies of books and another reading denoting the informational contents of said physical books, and the indicated tests arguably fail to detect this polysemy. Consider the Contradiction Test. It is difficult to hear the following sentence as felicitous:

(11) This is a book, but it's not a *book*.

Consider the VP-Ellipsis Test. The following sentence does not sound funny even though *Ulysses* presumably is an informational book while heavy tomes presumably must be physical copies:

(12) *Ulysses* is a book, and so is this heavy tome over here.

Based on these observations, one could claim that the term 'believe' is polysemous rather than ambiguous and dismiss the test results above.⁵

First, however, the Contradiction Test and the VP-Ellipsis Test do not face counterexamples if we restrict our attention to polysemous *verbs*. All example sentences above feature what appear to be polysemous verbs with closely related meanings: a functioning telephone and a working caretaker are both 'doing their job', driving a car and herding sheep are both ways of steering something in a desired direction and visual seeing and understanding are both ways of accessing reality. The tests work fine nevertheless, and as far as I can see, the same goes for all polysemous verbs. Based on the above tests, we can thus conclude that the verb 'believe' is not polysemous; and if the verb 'believe' is not polysemous, the noun 'belief' should not be polysemous either. Second, the noun 'belief', fails tests specifically designed to detect both ambiguity and polysemy. As e.g. Liebesman & Magidor (2017: 133–4) point out, polysemy shows itself in context-sensitive truth-values of count sentences. The following sentence can be read as true or false depending on which reading of 'book' is salient. It is true when read in terms of physical copies but false when read in terms of informational contents:

There are two copies of War and Peace and one copy of Ulysses on the shelf.

(13) There are three books on the shelf.

⁵ In fact, it's neither obvious that 'book' is polysemous (e.g. Liebesman & Magidor 2017) nor that polysemous terms fail the indicated tests (e.g. Liebesman & Magidor 2024). While I'm sympathetic to these concerns, I will set them aside here.

Sentences featuring ‘belief’ lack this context-sensitivity:

One sub-committee believes that Hannah is right for the job, the other sub-committee believes that Harry is right for the job, and Sally in the adjacent office believes that Hilary is right for the job. Aside from the mentioned sub-committees, there are no relevant groups in the building.

(14) There are exactly two beliefs being held in this building on who’s right for the job.

This sentence sounds univocally false in the given context because, intuitively, three such beliefs are being held. If ‘belief’ was polysemous between belief_i and belief_g , though, the sentence should have a true reading in terms of belief_g . The third ‘belief’ is held by Sally, an individual, who cannot hold beliefs_g .⁶

The ambiguity response is implausible because it relies on the linguistically implausible assumption that ‘believe’ is ambiguous or polysemous. Let me end this section with a brief discussion of two close cousins of the ambiguity/polysemy response.

On the first approach, the term ‘group belief’ is technical and bears only loose relations to our ordinary notion of belief. To respond, the group belief debate does not seem aimed at a technical notion. Participants in this debate typically start with ordinary ascriptions of beliefs to groups, and they marshal ordinary intuitions about cases to defend their views. This makes most sense if their interest is in an ordinary notion not a technical correlate. Gilbert (2013: 13) is quite explicit about this when she claims to ‘have developed an account of what it is for us to believe something—*according to our everyday understanding*’ (my emphasis). To be sure, one could try to shift the aims of the group belief debate towards a technical notion. But then one would have to say more about the rules of the game. Why couldn’t we just accept all the above definitions of

⁶ While it is possible in principle to hold that individuals can have beliefs_g , individualistic accounts of belief_g rule this out. They all entail that to believe_g you must have members, and individuals, by their nature, don’t have members. See also footnote 3.

group belief as definitions of slightly different technical concepts?⁷

On the second approach, the term ‘belief’ is used metaphorically when applied to groups, and the term ‘group belief’ picks out the metaphorical meaning of ‘belief’ when applied to groups. As will become clear below, I have little to object to the view that ‘belief’ is used metaphorically when applied to groups. However, first, proponents of individualistic accounts generally reject this idea, and so the indicated response is not available to them (see e.g. Lackey 2021: 4–5; Gilbert 2004: 96; contrast Gilbert 1987: 202n2). Second, even if group belief ascriptions are metaphorical, the term ‘group belief’ cannot pick out *the* metaphorical meaning of ‘belief’ when applied to groups, because there is no unique such meaning. On one influential account of metaphor, for instance, metaphors make implicit comparisons (e.g. Fogelin 2011). A metaphorical use of ‘Juliet is the sun’, for instance, conveys that Juliet is like the sun, where the context determines the respects in which the two are supposed to be alike. Depending on the context, the sentence can mean that Juliet is beautiful, important, dangerous to approach or has a high temperature. All these meanings are on a par, and none of these meanings counts as *the* metaphorical meaning of ‘Juliet is the sun’. Assuming this view of metaphor, if group belief ascriptions are metaphorical, they likewise convey that the group in question is *like* a believer, with the relevant dimensions of similarity varying from one context to another. There is no unique metaphorical meaning of ‘belief’ even if we focus solely on ascriptions to groups.⁸

5 Partial definitions

Let us turn to premise (P2), according to which some familiar analysis of belief is correct. Rejecting this premise would seem to require a very controversial stance in a decades-old debate from the philosophy of mind, but here is a suggestion to make this palatable. All familiar analyses of

⁷ List (2014), for instance, seems interested in both ordinary and technical notions, and, accordingly, he concludes that group belief can be defined in many ways.

⁸ On Davidson’s (1984) view, metaphorically used sentences have *no* propositional content over and above their literal content, but for my purposes, it suffices that metaphorical meaning varies from context to context.

belief are false, but they may be true as partial definitions with only non-groups in their domain. Instead of RDA, for instance, we should only accept the following claim:

RDA *partial*. For all non-groups x : x believes that p iff x is disposed to treat p as true in their reasoning.⁹

We still do not obtain an individualistic account simply by inserting this analysis into the Conjunctive Analysis. However, this difficulty can now be resolved easily. We need only combine the proposed analysis with a restricted version of whichever individualistic account we prefer, such as:

Operative Belief Account *partial*. For all groups x : x believes that p iff (1) there is a significant percentage of x 's operative members who believe that p and (2) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that p yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent.

Taken together, these analyses yield the following, disjunctive analysis of belief:

Disjunctivism. x believes that p iff x is a non-group and satisfies RDA *partial* or x is a group and satisfies the Operative Belief Account *partial*.

If we insert this analysis into the Conjunctive Analysis, we obtain:

Conjunctive Analysis'. x has a group belief that p iff x is a group and x is either a non-group and satisfies the RDA *partial* or x is a group and satisfies the Operative Belief Account *partial*.

This is logically equivalent to:

Conjunctive Analysis''. x has a group belief that p iff x is a group and satisfies the Operative Belief Account *partial*.

⁹ A reviewer relatedly proposes that 'belief' denotes a family-resemblance concept. If concepts of this kind cannot be analysed at all, this proposal is self-defeating because it would cast doubt on individualistic analyses too. However, family resemblance concepts may admit of a disjunctive analysis, in which case the proposal mirrors the one considered above.

And this is the Operative Belief Account. Gilbert & Pilchman (2014: 192), for instance, appear sympathetic to this disjunctivist approach, noting that familiar analyses of belief apply only to belief ‘*as it occurs in individual human beings*’, leaving open ‘the nature of belief in the *collective* case’ (see, similarly, Gilbert 2002: 48).

Unfortunately, the restriction of familiar accounts of belief to non-groups is not as innocuous as it may seem. Unified definitions are *prima facie* preferable to disunified ones. Thus, one should accept the proposed restriction only if there are positive reasons for doing so. The only reason I can muster takes the form of the following argument, where X is a placeholder for familiar analyses of belief such as RDA:

(Q1) X predicts that groups lack beliefs.

(Q2) Groups have beliefs though.

∴ On pain of rejecting X entirely, X must be restricted to non-groups.

Proponents of hardly any familiar analysis of belief should find this argument convincing though.

Take proponents of RDA. They should not see any reason to accept (Q1) if they grant (Q2). Once we grant (Q2), i.e. that groups have attitudes like belief, it is difficult to see on what grounds one could deny them reasoning dispositions. For instance, we ascribe reasoning dispositions to groups just as much as we ascribe beliefs to them. At least, we speak of groups as reasoners in sentences like the following:

(15) VW reasoned that once drivers got past around 50 mph, they would mainly be cruising anyway.

(16) Amazon reasoned that customers despised having to pay the cost of shipping.

If groups have reasoning dispositions, RDA predicts that they have beliefs, contrary to (Q1).

Analogous claims can be made about other dispositional analyses of belief in terms of, e.g. assertion dispositions (e.g. Kaplan 1996) or more complex clusters of dispositions (e.g. Schwitzgebel

2002). As Tollefsen (2015) points out, proponents of various forms of functionalism and proponents of interpretivism can accommodate group beliefs too (see, similarly, List & Pettit 2011; Brown 2023, 2024: Ch. 4), and Simion *et al.* (2022) argue that the same goes for knowledge-first analyses of belief.¹⁰ If one accepts any of these analyses of belief, one should reject the respective instance of (Q1) as long as one grants (Q2).

Premise (Q1) is harder to resist on other familiar analyses of belief. For instance, versions of the identity theory, where beliefs are (type or token) identical with brain states, immediately entail that groups lack beliefs, and the same goes for several forms of functionalism (see e.g. Huebner 2013; Tollefsen 2015: 66–96). Rupert (2005) argues similarly that group belief is incompatible with naturalistic theories of mental content. Finally, various authors maintain that belief requires phenomenal dispositions, and since groups arguably do not have phenomenology, this is once more hard to square with the claim that they have beliefs (see e.g. Cohen 1992; Railton 2014; Smithies 2019; Overgaard & Salice 2021; McCormick 2022; Sosa 2023).¹¹

Proponents of these latter views, however, should reject (Q2), i.e. the claim that groups have beliefs. This premise clashes immediately with their analyses, and they should accept it only if there are theory-independent reasons for doing so. Otherwise, they should see the prediction that groups lack beliefs as just another welcome illumination of an otherwise difficult case.¹² Theory-independent reasons for the existence of group beliefs, however, are hard to find.

Gilbert (2004) aims to provide such a reason, arguing that the existence of group beliefs best explains why we ascribe beliefs to groups in ordinary discourse. One may respond that these

¹⁰ Backes (2021) argues that interpretivism doesn't entail that groups have beliefs. That's consistent with my claim that interpretivism doesn't entail that groups lack beliefs.

¹¹ But see also e.g. Schmid 2014; Schwitzgebel 2015; Silver 2019; Collins 2023 for the claim that groups might be conscious after all.

¹² In the same way, several authors argue *for* the existence of group beliefs based on a prior commitment to e.g. functionalism or interpretivism (e.g. List & Pettit 2011; Tollefsen 2015).

ascriptions are metaphorical (e.g. Ludwig 2017: 293–5), but Gilbert counters that people ‘do not generally regard these ascriptions [of beliefs to groups] as metaphorical or as “pretend” ascriptions’ (102). Also arguing against the metaphor hypothesis, Tollefsen (2002: 396) further observes that group belief ascriptions are explanatorily powerful, that they are unlikely to be ‘simply false’ and that we do not lie when we ascribe beliefs to groups.

More would have to be said though to rule out the metaphor hypothesis, as neither Gilbert’s nor Tollefsen’s concerns are compelling. Responding to Gilbert, it is doubtful that ordinary intuitions about metaphoricity bear much evidential weight (see e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 27; Chung 2018: 390). Moreover, it is a questionable empirical assumption that people do not generally regard group belief ascriptions as metaphorical. Quinton (1976: 17), for instance, takes group belief ascriptions to be ‘plainly metaphorical’, and according to French (1995: 11), ‘[o]bviously, corporations cannot, in any normal sense, desire and believe’.¹³ For what it’s worth, I myself lack any firm intuition about whether group belief ascriptions are metaphorical. As for Tollefsen, the idea that group belief ascriptions are metaphorical does not entail that group belief ascriptions are explanatorily idle. Metaphors can be powerful tools to understand complex realities, and they may well help us in essential ways to understand the behaviour of groups (see, relatedly, the claim below that metaphors involve mapping complex phenomena onto more tractable ones). Relatedly, the metaphor hypothesis does not entail that group belief ascriptions are ‘simply false’ or that they are lies. A metaphorical utterance may convey a truth even if it is literally false (*pace* Davidson 1984), and if the speaker believes in that truth, they do not lie (see e.g. Stokke 2013).

The previous considerations undermine Gilbert and Tollefsen’s arguments against the metaphor hypothesis. In addition, there is positive evidence for the metaphor hypothesis. Personification is a common type of metaphor, as in the example ‘Inflation is eating up our profits’, where inflation is treated as an agent (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 33–4). Group belief ascriptions can be seen

¹³ Notably, French seems more open to granting groups genuine desires and beliefs in earlier work (e.g. French 1979).

as exemplifying this common type of metaphor, personifying groups.¹⁴ Relatedly, metaphors typically map an abstract domain onto a more concrete, better understood domain, as when an utterance of ‘Love is a flame’ maps the abstract phenomenon of love onto a concrete physical object (e.g. Levinson 1983: 160). Fittingly, group belief ascriptions can be seen as mapping the abstract behaviour of groups onto familiar folk psychological categories. Finally, several authors observe that the same group belief ascription can communicate different propositions in different contexts (e.g. McMahon 2003: 347; List 2014; Broncano-Berrocal 2025; Pettigrew, ms). Meanwhile, ascriptions of beliefs to individuals are not similarly context-sensitive. The metaphor hypothesis explains this nicely, for as indicated, metaphorical meanings likewise vary between contexts.¹⁵

These considerations do not settle whether group belief ascriptions are metaphorical, but they suffice to undermine Gilbert’s argument: it is at best unclear whether the best explanation for why we ascribe beliefs to groups entails that groups have beliefs and not just metaphorical beliefs.¹⁶

¹⁴ Personifications are still context-sensitive. A metaphorical utterance of ‘Onions don’t like me’, for instance, can mean a wealth of things depending on the context. I might find onions hard to digest, they might be sold out whenever I try to get them, they might go bad quickly when I store them, etc.

¹⁵ List (2014) and Pettigrew (ms) argue that the observed variability results from an ‘ambiguity’ in group belief ascriptions, while Broncano-Berrocal (2025) similarly holds that group belief ascriptions have varying ‘truth-conditions’. However, it is difficult to see how the supposed ambiguities these authors identify could arise except through an ambiguity in the term ‘belief’. Yet, as argued above, this term is not relevantly ambiguous.

¹⁶ Instead of being metaphorical, group belief ascriptions could also be instances of loose talk or so-called ‘meaning transfer’. These hypotheses, however, do face severe concerns. One hallmark of loose talk is that it comes with so-called ‘slack regulators’ (e.g. Lasnik 1999), and slack regulators seem to be missing in the case of ‘belief’. Meaning transfer (e.g. Nunberg 1995; Liebesman & Magidor 2018) could occur in the noun phrase (e.g. ‘Amazon’) or in the verb phrase (‘believes p’) of a group belief ascription, but problems arise in each case. When the meaning of a noun phrase is transferred, the original referent is normally unavailable for subsequent verb phrases (e.g. Liebesman & Magidor 2018: 258–61), but groups in group belief ascriptions are so available, as in ‘VW believes p and is a big company’ (see also Liebesman & Magidor 2018: 256–8 on number marking). When the meaning of a verb phrase is transferred, only the transferred meaning tends to be available for VP-ellipsis (e.g. Liebesman & Magidor 2018: 258–61), but again,

Lackey (2021) aims to provide another reason for the existence of group beliefs, arguing that since groups lie, we must acknowledge that they have beliefs. Relatedly, Tollefsen (2002: 396n4) argues that groups must have beliefs because they are morally responsible for their actions.¹⁷ But considering the previous discussion, the assumption that groups lie or have moral responsibility seems questionable. We ascribe lies and moral responsibility to groups, but just as in the case of group belief, this might be metaphorical.¹⁸ Indeed, if we think that group belief ascriptions are metaphorical, it is only natural to assume that the same goes for ascriptions of lies and moral responsibility to groups. It is a common feature of metaphors that they are extendable (e.g. Tirell 1989; Liebesman & Magidor 2018: 265–6). The metaphorical utterance ‘Jones is a bulldozer’, for instance, can easily be extended with utterances like ‘She crushes everything that’s in her way’ or ‘She’s unstoppable when she has fuel in her tank’. In the same way, an utterance of ‘VW lied’ or ‘VW is morally responsible for that’ may well be taken as an extension of a metaphorical ascription of group belief. In any case, the arguments for and against the metaphor hypothesis in the case of group lies and group moral responsibility seem exactly parallel to the arguments for and against the metaphor hypothesis regarding group belief. These hypotheses all stand or fall together.

In sum, unified accounts of belief are preferable to disunified ones. Consequently, proponents of familiar theories of belief should restrict their accounts to non-groups only if there are positive reasons for doing so. Yet the most promising argument for this restriction fails regardless of which specific account of belief one endorses. Therefore, familiar accounts of belief should not be restricted to non-groups, contrary to the response to the Anti-Individualistic Argument considered

the original meaning of ‘believe’ apparently is available for VP-ellipsis in, e.g. ‘VW believes p, and I do too’. See also Liebesman & Magidor (2018: 265–68) on the contrast between meaning transfer and metaphor.

¹⁷ I grant that moral responsibility entails belief though this is not entirely obvious (e.g. Silver 2022: 336–338).

¹⁸ A group, such as a company, can of course be sued and, at least in this sense, it can have *legal* responsibility. It would need to be argued though that this entails having beliefs.

in this section.

6 Grounding

Here is the most promising strategy to reject (P3) of the argument above: Proponents of individualistic accounts of group belief are not after an *analysis* of group belief. Instead, they aim at something like the (metaphysical or empirical) grounds of group belief. Properly understood, the Operative Belief Account, for instance, comes down to the following:

Operative Belief Account *grounding*. Whenever a group G believes that p, the fact that G believes that p is grounded in the fact that (1) there is a significant percentage of G's operative members who believe that p and (2) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that p yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent.

Phrased in these terms, individualistic accounts of group belief are consistent with (P1) and (P2), contrary to (P3), for the following reason: If the Conjunctive Analysis holds, then correct *analyses* of group belief result from inserting correct analyses of being a group and having a belief into this analysis, and if some familiar analysis of belief is correct, all such analyses are indeed collective. However, even if the Conjunctive Analysis holds, it does not follow that all correct *accounts of the grounds of beliefs in groups* result from inserting correct analyses of groups and beliefs into the Conjunctive Analysis. First, inserting such analyses yields no grounding claim at all but only another biconditional. Second, a general analysis of belief need not tell us anything about the grounds of particular beliefs, which may vary from case to case.

To begin with, this response entails a substantive reorientation of the debate. As noted, individualistic accounts are most naturally interpreted as standard philosophical analyses, and they are never stated in terms of grounding. Thus, if the grounding response is the only viable reply to the Anti-Individualistic Argument, this alone would be noteworthy. Furthermore, however, it is doubtful that this response succeeds.

First, while the grounding response does not imply that all familiar analyses of belief are false,

proponents of this response must still reject many such analyses. We have seen above that e.g. the identity theory, several naturalistic accounts and phenomenal accounts of belief presumably entail that groups cannot have beliefs. Given that, the grounding version of e.g. the Operative Belief Account quantifies universally over situations which do not exist. This may not make the account false, but it trivializes it completely. To rule out the grounding response, one could thus weaken (P2) in the Anti-Individualistic Argument to range only over the just mentioned analyses of belief. The resulting premise would remain hard to reject. After all, proponents of individualistic accounts presumably do not want to be committed to rejecting a whole spectrum of independently developed positions in the philosophy of mind.

One could respond that, since individualists must say that group beliefs exist, they are trivially committed to rejecting the indicated theories of belief, and they should not see this as an additional burden. But while individualists are presumably committed to the existence of group beliefs, this has no immediate consequences for familiar analyses of belief. For one could hold that ‘belief’ means something different when applied to groups than in the individual case (as per the ambiguity response) or that the nature of belief differs between the group domain and the individual domain (as per the partial definition response). I have tried to show that these approaches fail, but this cannot be seen as a premeditated commitment that proponents of individualistic accounts have been happy to accept all along. Indeed, Gilbert & Pilchman (2014: 192), for instance, make quite clear that they want to stay neutral on familiar theories of belief including the ones just mentioned.

Even granting RDA or similar analyses that accommodate group beliefs, a second problem remains. The grounding versions of e.g. the Operative Belief Account aims to provide unified grounds for all group beliefs. On the face of it, however, one would expect that such unified grounds do not exist. Specifically, if we accept views like RDA, most authors should grant that individual beliefs are multiply realizable in physical states. The reasoning dispositions relevant for RDA, for instance, can be grounded in different brain states and maybe even in electronic

impulses or extraterrestrial slime, and these grounds resist a unified description (other than that they ground reasoning dispositions). The same should go for group beliefs. In groups, reasoning dispositions can be grounded in different patterns of member states, and just like in the individual case, the most natural hypothesis is that these grounds resist a unified description (beyond the fact that they ground reasoning dispositions).¹⁹

To support this further, notice that, when understood as grounding claims about e.g. group reasoning dispositions, all indicated individualistic accounts seem to underestimate the complexity with which such dispositions can arise.²⁰ Take a group where the operative members are disposed to rely on an expert panel regarding some factual questions. The experts need not themselves be operative members if, for instance, the operative members still have the authority to dismiss their input. Such a group may be disposed to treat *p* as true in reasoning once the experts believe or accept *p* entirely independently of whether any operative member believes or accepts *p* yet. Or take a group where most operative members are lazy or indifferent and never engage. These factors partly determine the reasoning dispositions of the group, but they are not reflected in any given account. For instance, once the engaged operative members believe or accept *p*, the group may be disposed to treat *p* as true in reasoning independently of whether these members make up a ‘significant percentage’ of the operative members and independently of what the other operative members believe or accept.

To be clear, I am not denying that specific group beliefs are grounded in specific individual states—they probably are. Nor do I deny that group beliefs supervene on individual states—they

¹⁹ List & Pettit (2011: 76–7) and List (2014: 1617–8) also note that, assuming functionalism or interpretivism, beliefs in groups are multiply realizable, and Simion *et al.* (2022) make the same observation about knowledge-first accounts of belief.

²⁰ Tollefsen (2002 2015) and Brown (2023, 2024: Ch. 4) relatedly observe that the predictions of individualistic accounts diverge from those of functionalist and interpretivist collective accounts.

probably do. But these observations do not support the stronger claim that there is a single, determinate pattern of member states that grounds every instance of group belief. The considerations above are meant to challenge that assumption and, in doing so, to undermine the ambitions of individualistic accounts of group belief.

Proponents of individualistic accounts could, of course, respond by starting to develop disjunctive grounding accounts of group belief.²¹ But just like in the case of individuals, it is unclear whether there is any limit to the number of disjuncts required, making it doubtful that the resulting account would be useful if it can be completed at all. In any case, it would still follow that individualistic accounts, as I have understood them here, are bound to fail.

In sum, the grounding response incurs too heavy commitments in the philosophy of mind and even if these commitments are granted, it settles proponents of individualistic accounts with a project that is bound to fail.

7 Conclusion

The Anti-Individualistic Argument is sound, and we should reject individualistic accounts of group belief. The same goes for individualistic accounts of group justified belief, group knowledge and group assertion. They likewise clash with existing analyses of justification, knowledge and assertion, and the ambiguity response, the partial definition response and the grounding response face the same kinds of challenges as in the case of group belief. A better alternative, I submit, is to analyse these group phenomena in terms of whichever theory prevails in the individual domain. For instance, if individual beliefs are reasoning dispositions, then group beliefs should simply be analysed as reasoning dispositions as well.

²¹ List (2014), Broncano-Berrocal (2025) and Pettigrew (ms), for instance, each defend pluralistic accounts of group belief. As noted, they present their views as addressing different meanings (or truth-conditions) of group belief ascriptions. However, their proposals could perhaps be re-interpreted as offering disjunctive accounts of the grounds of group belief, which would align with the suggestion above.

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