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JOINT COMMITMENT AND COLLECTIVE BELIEF: A REVISIONARY PROPOSAL*

abstract

According to Margaret Gilbert, two or more people collectively believe that p if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that p as a body. But the way she construes joint commitment in her account – as a commitment of and by the several parties to “doing something as a body” – encourages the thought that the phenomenon accounted for is not that of genuine belief. I explain why this concern arises and explore a different way of construing joint commitment, in order to avoid the concern. This leads me to propose a revised Gilbertian account of collective belief, according to which two or more people collectively believe that p if and only if they are jointly committed to p as true.

keywords

collective belief, acceptance, joint commitment, rejectionism

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Introduction In a series of publications spanning over 25 years, Margaret Gilbert has developed and defended the following account of “collective belief”: “The members of a population, P, collectively believe that *p* if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that *p* as a body” (Gilbert 2002a, p. 137; Gilbert & Pilchman 2014, p. 197).

It is widely accepted that Gilbert’s account describes an important and interesting social phenomenon. What is less widely accepted is that the phenomenon in question is that of belief. Many so-called “rejectionist” critics claim that the collective attitude she picks out is better understood as a form of “acceptance” than of belief, since it does not necessarily aim at truth, and is brought about voluntarily.

In this paper, I argue that Gilbert’s account, as it stands, is susceptible to something like these criticisms, but I think this calls for revision of the account rather than outright rejection. The paper has two parts. In the first I rehearse the debate between Gilbert and the rejectionists, and suggest that Gilbert’s problem arises from her construal of joint commitment in practical terms, as a commitment of the several parties to “doing something as a body”. In the second part I explore the possibility of construing joint commitment differently, in order to avoid the rejectionist threat. Drawing on recent work by Pamela Hieronymi I propose a revised account, according to which a set of individuals collectively believes that *p* if and only if they are jointly committed to *p* as true.¹

1. An example can help to bring Gilbert’s account into view:

**Joint commitment
to believe that *p* as
a body**

Roz personally believes that it is never justified for one country to take up arms against another. When Mark asserts the justifiability of a defensive war, he speaks very forcefully. Rather than argue, Roz decides to agree with him. So she says, “Yes, indeed”.

**1.1
Gilbert’s account**

It seems that now either of them could properly make the collective belief statement, “We believe that a defensive war is justifiable”. And this is true even if Mark was for

1 In several places (e.g. Gilbert & Pilchman 2014, p. 198; Gilbert 2002a, pp. 138-140) Gilbert cashes out what is meant by “believe that *p* as a body” in terms of the notion of *emulating a single believer of p*. To be so jointly committed is for several parties each to have incurred duties to speak and act “as would any one of several mouthpieces of the body in question” (Gilbert 2002a, p. 140). Had I focused on this formulation, I might have presented my proposal less as a *revision* of Gilbert’s account than as a suggestion for how we should understand her notion of “emulation”, in order to forestall the rejectionist threat.

some reason asserting the opposite of *his* personal view when he spoke. In other words, it may be true, for Roz and Mark, that “We believe that *p*”, though neither of them personally believes that *p* (Gilbert 2002a, p. 137).

According to Gilbert, what happens in cases like this is that each of the parties expresses his or her readiness to let a particular proposition stand as *their* collective view. Here Mark signals his readiness by making an assertion, while Roz signals hers by assenting. This, it seems, is enough to make the collective belief statement “We believe that a defensive war is justified” true of them, and this is so even if neither personally holds that belief.²

Gilbert’s primary interest is in the normative fine-structure of such situations. She notes that once each party signals readiness to let some view be established as the collective view, each incurs a distinctive suite of obligations and entitlements in relation to the other(s). Specifically, each owes it to the other(s) to speak and act in ways that accord with them believing that *p* as a body. While no party need pretend to personally believe that *p*, each must declare that *p* when appropriate, and none may express direct disagreement without “preamble” (e.g., “*I personally do not believe that p*”). Should any fail to meet these obligations, any other has the standing to rebuke the recalcitrant party.³

Gilbert accounts for this normative situation with the notion of *joint commitment*. Like personal commitments, joint commitments are sources of normative constraint and standing. If Jim decides to go to the party then he is committed to going, and so, all else being equal, he *ought* to go. Jim is then *answerable* to himself for going, and might appropriately chide himself should he fail to go (without rescinding his decision). Likewise, if Beth and Sue jointly commit to walking together then, all else being equal, they ought to do so. Each owes it to other to play her part in seeing to it that they walk together, and each has the standing to rebuke the other for failing to do so.

A joint commitment is thus, like a personal commitment, a normatively-significant process of self-binding, except that what is bound is not a single person but two or more people, who thereby constitute a “plural subject”. By reciprocally expressing readiness to let “a defensive war is justified” stand as their collective view, Mark and Roz bind themselves to believing as a single body that a defensive war is justified. Since such a commitment seems to explain the distinctive obligations and entitlements Roz and Mark have in relation to one another, Gilbert proposes that this commitment constitutes their collective belief.⁴

Many of Gilbert’s critics have seized upon examples like the one involving Roz and Mark in order to argue that, regardless of how Gilbert accounts for it, the phenomenon picked out could not be that of belief. This is because the collective view is formed for reasons unrelated to its truth, and is brought about voluntarily.⁵ But belief must necessarily aim at truth, and belief cannot be willed,⁶ so (they claim) the attitude could not be that of belief.

1.2 Rejectionism rejected

2 It is worth noting that the way cases like this are described reflects a crucial methodological difference between Gilbert and her rejectionist opponents. Gilbert treats the truth- and appropriateness-conditions of collective belief statements as something evident in our practices of making and accepting such statements – i.e., as part of the phenomenon to be explained. Rejectionists, by contrast, tend to treat the truth (or appropriateness) of such statements as beholden to a theory of belief.

3 See Gilbert (1987, p. 199)

4 Note that what the group does (collectively believing that *p*) and what the group is committed to doing (believing that *p* as a single body) are not seen by Gilbert as identical. Rather, the commitment to the latter constitutes the former. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify this.

5 See, e.g., Meijers (1999) and Wray (2001).

6 I follow Gilbert in accepting these two requirements on belief. A canonical supporting argument is in Williams (1970).

Let us start with the concern about truth. In the Roz and Mark case we find that neither party personally takes what they collectively believe to be true. Perhaps, then, in letting this view stand as their collective view, the parties are only *going along with* or *accepting* the view, rather than believing it.⁷ Moreover, neither party seems to be motivated to let that view stand as their view for reasons pertaining to its truth. We are not told why Mark makes his assertion, but Roz agrees only to avoid an argument. But since Mark's assertion together with Roz's agreement is what establishes the group view, it seems that the group view gets established for non-epistemic reasons. Such reasons would be of the right kind for acceptance, but are of the wrong kind for belief.

Gilbert (2002a, 2014) replies that this objection wrongly assumes that the phenomena picked out at the individual level must constitute the same kind of phenomena at the collective level. Even if the *group members* are simply going along with *p*, it does not follow that the *group itself* is simply going along with *p*. And even if the *group members* participate in the establishment of a group view for non-epistemic reasons it does not follow that the *group itself* is motivated by the same reasons. (Indeed, as Gilbert notes, the members' participatory motives are better viewed as the group view's *causes* than its *reasons*).

What, then, of the rejectionist claim that collective belief is voluntary, so cannot be genuine belief? This can seem plausible because, for Gilbert, in order for a collective belief that *p* to be established, each individual must *act* in a certain way. For example, Mark performs a declarative speech act, while Roz "decides to agree". These two performances are all it takes for their collective belief to be established, and since both performances are produced voluntarily, it seems the collective belief must be too.

Gilbert again replies that the rejectionist is looking in the wrong place – looking to the wills of the group members, rather than to the collective will. Even if the members must voluntarily signal their participation in the establishment of the collective belief, this is no reason to conclude that the group itself voluntarily establishes its belief. So, claims Gilbert (2002a, p. 155), "there is no confrontation with involuntarism" at the collective level.

1.3 Rehabilitating rejectionism

I think that headway in the debate between Gilbert and the rejectionists can be made through a shift of focus. Instead of focusing on the phenomenon picked out in her examples, rejectionists should attend to the joint commitment Gilbert uses to account for that phenomenon, and, in particular, to the *object* of this joint commitment – i.e., *that which it is a commitment to*. The object of the joint commitment in the case of collective belief is "believing that *p* as a body". The question is: how should we understand this object?

Well, according to Gilbert, "joint commitments are always commitments to 'act as a body' [...] where 'acting' is taken in a broad sense" (Gilbert 2002b, p. 41), so as to include the having of psychological states. This suggests that we should interpret the object of the joint commitment in Gilbert's account in an "attitude-centered" way, rather than a "content-centered" way. That is, what the participants in a collective belief jointly commit to is the having of an attitude – the believing that *p* – rather than to the content of that attitude, i.e., *p* itself.⁸ This, to my mind, is where the problem in Gilbert's account lies.

⁷ There are various competing accounts of the attitude of acceptance in the received literature, but I abstract away from their differences here. For my purposes the key features are, first, that acceptance need not aim at truth in quite the same way as belief, and, second, that acceptance is under the control of the will to a greater extent than belief.

⁸ If jointly committing to the having of the belief that *p* is understood – as Gilbert sometimes explains it – as jointly committing to emulating a single believer of *p*, then perhaps the two options presented here are not so starkly opposed. After all, it may be that the way to understand what it is to emulate a single believer of *p* is in terms of commitment to *p* as true. Cf. footnote 1 above.

You can begin to see the problem by noting that, in the individual case, a person could fully commit to the having of a belief that p , and not yet believe that p . Perhaps I recognize that, all things considered, the belief that my work is going along nicely would be a good belief for me to have, and so commit myself to believing – that is, to having the belief – that my work is going along nicely. This might amount to my intending to inculcate the belief that my work is going along nicely, but it does not yet amount to my so believing.

I think the same trouble arises in the collective case. There may be practical or prudential reasons why a set of people should jointly commit to believing some proposition as a body. For instance, it might be best for a tobacco company's business if they could construct themselves as a plural subject of the belief that smoking does not cause cancer, and so, recognizing this, they commit themselves to believing – that is, to having the belief – that smoking does not cause cancer. As rejectionists have urged, it seems strange to say that the company now *genuinely believes* that smoking does not cause cancer. After all, they have only considered whether the belief would be a good belief to have, not whether its content – that smoking does not cause cancer – is true.

The problem, as I see it, is that many of the reasons which would be of the right kind for *jointly committing to believing that p as a single body* are reasons which would be of the wrong kind for *believing that p* . Chief amongst these would be considerations that bear on the question of whether believing that p as a single body would be good for us to do, regardless of whether p is true. To be sure, p being true (or likely true, or well supported by evidence) would sometimes be a good reason to jointly commit to believing that p as a single body, but it is far from the only such reason. Another good reason might be that so believing would maximize profit, and indeed this sort of reason could bear decisively on the question of whether to commit (or jointly commit) to believing that p . But, as we have seen, to be moved by some such reason is not yet to have formed the belief that p . So it is unclear how any such commitment could, as Gilbert suggests it could, constitute any such belief.

If rejectionism can be rehabilitated in this way then Gilbert's account is not, as it stands, an account of something properly called belief. But since the problem seems to be generated by the way she construes joint commitment, perhaps what is called for is not an outright rejection of the account but rather a revision of that construal. In the rest of the paper I draw on recent work by Pamela Hieronymi to explore this possibility.

Hieronymi observes that certain propositional attitudes can be formed or revised simply by settling for oneself a question. Intentions are like this, as are beliefs: "If you [...] settle for yourself the question of whether p , you have thus, ipso facto, formed a belief that p " (Hieronymi 2005, p. 447).

Hieronymi calls these "commitment-constituted attitudes", since what it is to have them is just to have committed oneself to an answer to some question. To be so committed is also to have incurred certain normative statuses: "If I believe p , then I am committed to p as true, that is, I am answerable to questions and criticisms that would be answered by the considerations that bear on whether p " (Hieronymi 2005, pp. 449-450).

However, not all propositional attitudes embody one's answer to a certain kind of question; some are more like a mental exercise or undertaking. Hieronymi calls these attitudes "action-like", and includes among them, "supposing that p for the sake of argument, imagining there's no heaven, or remembering your keys" (2005, p. 451). To this we can add *acceptances*, as least as they are understood in the debate between Gilbert and the rejectionists.⁹

2. Joint commitment to p as true

2.1 Doxastic commitments

⁹ Gilbert herself (2002a, p. 134) suggests that supposing for the sake of argument is a paradigm case of acceptance.

There are, of course, questions *relevant* to the formation of “action-like” attitudes, such as whether they would be useful, or somehow good attitudes to have. But settling any such question does not yet amount to forming that attitude. Instead it amounts to forming a different, second-order attitude – the intention to inculcate the first-order attitude. Though I will not here attempt to support Hieronymi’s distinction between commitment-constituted and action-like attitudes, I do think the taxonomy it engenders could aid Gilbert in her debate with the rejectionists. This is because, by Hieronymi’s lights, acceptance is not a commitment-constituted attitude, but belief is. So if some kind of *Hieronymian* commitment constitutes the phenomenon at issue then that phenomenon could not be acceptance, but might be belief. The threat of rejectionism arises for Gilbert from what I called her “attitude-centered” reading of the joint commitment she sees as constitutive of collective belief. What Hieronymi offers is a “content-centered” understanding of this commitment, which I think could help Gilbert avoid the rejectionist threat. In light of this, here is the revised version of Gilbert’s account I propose:

The members of a population, P, collectively believe that p if and only if they are jointly committed to p as true.

For the remainder of the paper I briefly elaborate and assess this proposal.

2.2 Collective doxastic commitments What is it for the members of a population to be jointly committed to p as true? On my proposal, they must have settled for themselves the question of whether p . How this can happen is suggested by one of Gilbert’s own examples:

There are three states in a particular alliance [... represented by] Peter, Antoine, and Karl. Previously the alliance had come to believe that the way to achieve its goal G was to bomb country C, or, for short, it had come to believe that g . Now each member prefers, for its own reasons, that the alliance’s bombing of C be discontinued. It therefore wants to bring it about that the alliance cease to believe that g . Karl speaks first, in the name of his own country. He is quite likely to say: “Is bombing C really going to achieve G?”. In other words, he is likely to question the *truth of g* [...] Peter might appropriately say, “It’s not clear that it is [...] I’d say that bombing isn’t likely to achieve G. Given the people we are up against, it is just as likely to have the opposite effect!”. Karl and Antoine might eagerly approve this, thus establishing for the alliance a new collective belief [...]. Given this scenario, on what basis did the alliance give up its belief that g ? It did so for this reason: given the character of the people the alliance is up against, the bombing of C is not – after all – likely to achieve goal G (Gilbert 2002a, p. 149).

The example purports to show, *contra* the claims of rejectionists, that a group can form or revise a group view for properly epistemic reasons, even when the reasons of the individuals for forming or revising the group view are prudential or practical. So even when the participatory motives of group members are of the wrong kind for belief, the group itself might believe for the right kind of reasons.

This seems correct. What seems wrong, however, is what Gilbert’s account implies about how we should characterize what is going on in the example. It seems wrong to think that what the delegates are doing is jointly committing to believing not- g as a body. For it is not the collective belief that g which they are discussing, but rather the matter of g . In Hieronymian terms, the delegates are engaged in the joint activity of settling a question. But it is not the

question of whether they should go on believing that g , but the question of g itself. It seems legitimate to call the outcome of their inquiry the forging of a commitment. But the sort of commitment forged is a commitment to p as true, not a commitment to the having of the belief that p .

The revised account thus seems adequate to account for at least one of Gilbert's examples. I do not, however, wish to claim it can vindicate all the cases she offers of "acknowledged group belief". Roz and Mark, for example, do not seem to be genuinely settling for themselves the question of whether a defensive war is justified, and so I suspect the Hieronymian approach would side with Gilbert's critics in rejecting theirs as a case of genuine belief. This is so even if (as Gilbert suggests) we are apt, pre-theoretically, to understand a case like theirs as a case of belief. So the revised account I am proposing is also a somewhat *revisionary* account, requiring, in some cases, that we revise our intuitive judgments.

Where it does find application, the revisionary proposal seems well equipped to account for the normative fine-structure Gilbert observes. A commitment to p as true, no less than a commitment to a course of action, is a source of normative constraint and standing. On account of one's doxastic commitment to p , one is liable to certain challenges to p , obliged to provide reasons of the right sort when challenged, subject to normative appraisal, and a suitable target of reactive attitudes on the basis of such appraisal. Someone committed to p as true also arguably has the normative standing to assert that p , and to arrange her practical life – including her dealings with others – around p 's being the case. And, just as with a joint commitment of the practical sort, the parties to a joint doxastic commitment will incur distinctive *individual* obligations and entitlements: they will need to see to it that they all speak and act in ways that accord with their collective commitment to p as true.

However, it might be thought that the revisionary proposal, whatever its independent prospects, does not cohere with Gilbert's broader philosophical enterprise. Gilbert uses the same construal of joint commitment – the construal which sees the object of joint commitment as always some kind of "acting as a body" (in a broad sense of "acting") – to account for many different facets of the social world, but I am proposing she gives up this construal for the case of collective beliefs. Could she accept my proposal?

I would like to think that she could. This because the Hieronymian approach to commitment does not *exclude* but can actually *encompass* Gilbertian "commitments of the will". Thus, when Gilbert stipulates that a commitment is a "fact [...] about what one has reason to do" (Gilbert 2013, p. 899), she can be seen to be referring to what, for Hieronymi, is just one kind of commitment. It is the kind formed by settling for oneself a question of the form, "Would X-ing be good to do?". But there are other sorts of questions, the settling of which amounts to the forming of other sorts of attitudes, amongst which are beliefs.

My revisionary proposal is, at this point, only a sketch – there are a number of important details that must still be filled out. What exactly is it for a group of people to settle for themselves a question of whether or not p ? Might they settle such a question in a way that differs from how they have settled that question for themselves individually?¹⁰ And to what extent is the will – of the individuals or of the collective itself – involved in such an exercise? Depending on the answer to these and other related questions, the revisionary proposal may end up being a more or less radical departure from Gilbert's original account than first envisaged. Still, I think the proposal is worth pursuing, because, as it stands, Gilbert's account

2.3 Assessing the proposal

Conclusion

¹⁰ Thanks to Jacob Heim and Silvia Tossut for emphasizing to me the importance of this question.

seems susceptible to the grave threat of rejectionism. If collective belief is constituted by a Gilbertian joint commitment – a commitment to doing something as a body – then collective believers will routinely and non-criticisably form their collective views in ways unbecoming of belief. Nevertheless, I think that Gilbert’s account can be revised to avoid these problems, and hence maintained as an account of genuine belief. What is needed is a broadening of the notion of joint commitment, to include collective doxastic commitment.

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