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Containing Multitudes: Reflection, Expertise and Persons as Groups

From time to time, philosophers like to raise the possibility of the existence of group minds or group persons. In order for something to be interestingly and appropriately described as a group person it must satisfy two conditions. First, it must itself exhibit various characteristics that are distinctive of persons. Unless it did this, it would not be a group *person*. Secondly, it must be composed of entities that are themselves persons or relevantly person-like. Without this, it would not be a *group* person. It is the difficulty of seeing how these two conditions can be satisfied together that has made the existence and possible natures of group persons problematic. For the things that paradigmatically satisfy the first condition, namely persons, are not obviously thought of as being composed of person-like entities related in some group-like way. And the things that paradigmatically satisfy the second condition, such as sports teams, committees and string quartets, are not obviously thought of as themselves displaying personal characteristics. Investigators of group persons – though not always thinking of themselves as such – have usually approached the problem by starting with paradigmatic and uncontroversial groups and exploring the extent to which personal characteristics can be attributed to them.[1] Since it would be unreasonable to expect such groups to exhibit, even in some possibly attenuated way, all the characteristics of an ordinary person, attention is usually directed to some subset of these characteristics. Can such a group have a single consciousness? Can it be the subject of intentional mental states like belief? Can it act? Can it be guilty?

What recommends this approach is that it leaves unchallenged our strong bias in favor of seeing (ordinary) persons as conceptually basic or primitive. One might, however, wonder about proceeding in the opposite direction – starting with a paradigmatic satisfier of the first condition, an ordinary person, and arguing that, despite appearances to the contrary, it is in fact composed of a number of persons or (and this would be important to stall an infinite regress) person-like entities related in a group-like way. Dennett's Multiple Drafts Model of the self might be thought to fit this rubric.[2] If this approach were successful, then it would turn out that an ordinary person was already a group person of a sort.

What I want to do in this paper is to examine a structural similarity between ordinary persons and certain kinds of groups. If there does exist such a similarity, then ordinary persons will exhibit a certain feature distinctive of a kind of group and hence, to that extent, be *group* persons; and certain groups will exhibit a feature characteristic of persons, and hence to that extent, be group *persons*. The important point, though, will not be whether we call certain groups "persons" or persons "groups". In the two conditions I offered at the outset for something to be a group person, I used the vague expressions "certain characteristics" and "relevantly person-like". Whether something counts as a group person will depend on decisions about when to apply these expressions, decisions that will involve a large dose of stipulation. The important point, rather, is the existence and nature of the structural parallels I will attempt to spell out.

Epistemic Unities

I shall suggest that persons have a structural similarity to one sub-variety of the kind of group I call epistemic unities, namely, multiple-expert epistemic unities (MEUs). Let me start by briefly discussing epistemic unities in general.[3] Epistemic unities are to be understood in terms of the notion of a constitutive norm. C is a constitutive norm of a type of entity E only if a) something cannot be

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an E unless is satisfies C to some minimal extent; and b) being an E, by its nature, exerts pressure towards the complete satisfaction of C, so that one E is a better example of an E than another if the norm is satisfied to a greater extent in it than in the other.[4] An epistemic unity is a group a constitutive norm of which is the obtaining, among its members, of some epistemic relation. Among epistemic unities is a variety I will call "expert epistemic unities," in which the constitutive epistemic relation is one of taking as an expert.[5] By "taking someone as an expert" I mean, roughly, being disposed to believe whatever the expert believes within the area of her expertise. (I will henceforth omit this qualification concerning area of expertise.) Sometimes we know what someone we take as an expert believes. In such cases, we will in general come to share that belief categorically (if we do not already have it). The qualification "in general" is necessary because we might, in finding out that the expert believes that *p*, also come to learn something that makes us – at least on this particular occasion if not more widely – not treat them as an expert. For example, we might find out that the expert believes that *p* but was hypnotized into so believing by a rival. Frequently, though, we do not know the beliefs of someone we take as an expert. In that case, our taking her as an expert will consist only in a conditional belief: *p*, given that the expert believes that *p* (and not-*p*, given that the expert believes that not-*p*). If someone has a conditional belief, learns that the condition is satisfied, and in so doing learns nothing that leads her to revise the conditional belief itself, she will come to have (if she does not already have) the corresponding categorical belief.[6] Assuming these conditions, we can express what it is to take someone as an expert in terms of having the appropriate conditional beliefs. Extending our treatment to cover degrees of belief as well as full belief, we can sum up what it is for A to take B as an expert by saying that it requires satisfying the following formula:

(Expert) $P_A(Q|P_B(Q)=r)=r$

This says that A believes Q to degree *r*, conditionally on the hypothesis that B (the expert) believes Q to degree *r*.[7] Formulae like Expert, if they function as constitutive norms for some type of group, I shall call Epistemic Principles of Unity.

Someone may take another as an expert for epistemic or non-epistemic reasons. To take someone as an expert for epistemic reasons is to model one's belief on hers because one thinks her beliefs will be true (or whatever the appropriate virtue is for degrees of belief). In a case such as this, one takes another as an expert because one *believes* her to be an expert in the ordinary sense. But one might also model one's belief on someone's for the sake of the agreement rather than the truth. (In this case, the description of the person on whom one models one's belief as an "expert" is by courtesy only.) Given the way in which belief aims at truth, it is doubtful one could achieve such agreement without thinking that the expert in such a case had, or was likely to have, true beliefs. But one might, in unusual circumstances, desire the conformity, and attempt to bring it about indirectly, even while believing that the expert's beliefs were false.[8]

Both of these scenarios, of epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for taking someone as an expert, suggest the possibility of groups of different sorts in which one or more people take someone as an expert. For example, the Pope is held to be infallible in matters of faith and morals. The Catholic Church might be thought of as a group for which it is a constitutive norm that the faithful take the Pope as an expert in matters of faith and morals.[9] For a non-epistemic case, one might consider various cultic or totalitarian groups in which individuals seek conformity with the group's beliefs (assuming that groups can have beliefs) or with the beliefs of a charismatic leader. Groups of these types may be further distinguished by various factors, such as whether the non-expert members must be aware of each others' relation to the expert or not, whether various material conditions (such as living together) must obtain, and so on.

Multiple-Expert Epistemic Unities

In the kinds of groups considered so far, there has been a single expert and one or more non-experts. But there are some kinds of expert epistemic unities in which there are multiple experts. Perhaps the best way to understand such groups

 https://doi.org/10.3366/epd.2015.2.1.57 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is through an analogy with unities based on authority to command rather than expertise. For A to take B as an authority is for A to be disposed to do whatever B commands (within the area of her authority). One might take someone as an authority because one thinks she will command what is best and one wants to do that, or simply because one wants to do what she commands for the sake of obedience. Various groups can be conceived in which one or more people take someone as an authority, for either good-based or obedience-based reasons.

Some notable examples of command unities, however, include multiple sources of authority. Take an army, for example. Everybody except a private has some authority over someone and everyone except the commander-in-chief takes someone in the group as an authority. Since, in such an entity, there exist multiple sources of authority, one of the keys to understanding it is to consider what happens when authorities conflict. You, a private, may be ordered to Φ by your corporal, but to Ψ by your major, where Φ and Ψ are incompatible. Since the major is an authority for the corporal as well as for you, if the corporal knew of the major's command, she ought to make it her own. But there is no guarantee that she will know of the command. Hence, you may be faced with two conflicting orders. What should you do? Discount the corporal's order and follow the major's. This is because the major and the corporal exist as members of a hierarchy in which the major outranks the corporal. In a multiple authority command unity, one always gives precedence to the orders of the higher-ranking over the lower-ranking.

One further point can be usefully made in this analogy before we return to the epistemic case. What is it that gives the major authority over the corporal and both authority over the private? The answer to this question is connected to the fact that an entity like an army is not primarily a good-based but an obedience-based command unity. In a good-based unity, B's authority over A derives from A's conviction of the 'betterness' of B's commands. It must, therefore, be grounded in (one's beliefs about) some substantive facts about the authority that explain that 'betterness' (for example, superior knowledge or understanding). Although someone might, in an army, be promoted because of such things as superior knowledge and understanding, authority derives merely from one's place in the structure itself. And one obeys because disobedience is punished, perhaps even when disobedience would produce an uncontroversially better action than the one commanded.

Coming back to the epistemic case, we are to consider the counterpart to a multiple authority command unity – a multiple expert epistemic unity (MEU). As an example of an epistemically based MEU, consider a variant of the children's game Telephone. The first child, call her the source, whispers something to the child seated to her left, who in turn whispers it to the next, and so on until the last child is whispered to. In the traditional version of the game, the point is merely to laugh at how the original message has become distorted. But suppose the point were to see who could determine what the source had said. Each child has a belief about this, based on what she was told by the previous child. But whispering of strange messages is an inherently unreliable means of transmission. Every time the information is transmitted, it risks, and often suffers, degradation. Thus, if any child could get the opinion of someone closer to the source than her neighbor, that would be better. If that informant disagreed with the neighbor, the child would model her opinion on the closer informant and simply disregard what her neighbor told her. Even if the neighbor is somehow more reliable than the closer informant, even if she is brighter and has better hearing, still the closer informant's opinion is more valuable. The whole system is an epistemically based MEU because the ordering of expertise is determined by who is more likely to be right, which in turn is founded on various natural facts about whispering, and the number of transmissions intervening between any given expert and the source.

Reflection

I now wish to pursue the idea that a person is an epistemically based MEU. The relevant Epistemic Principle of Unity has, in fact, already been much discussed in the philosophical literature, being none other than Bas van Fraassen's principle of Reflection:

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(Reflection) $P_{A,t}(Q|P_{A,t'}(Q)=r)=r$,

where t' is later than t.[10] This is a refinement on the schema of Expert above since it introduces a temporal parameter. What it says is that a person at a given time treats herself at a later time as an expert. This is a multiple-expert principle since each person normally has many later selves. The first question we must take up in consideration of Reflection is whether we should conform to this principle, and if so, whether for epistemic or non-epistemic reasons? Most, if not all, of the arguments offered by Van Fraassen (and others) in favor of Reflection present non-epistemic reasons for satisfying the principle.[11] For example, perhaps the most prominent argument is that failure to satisfy the principle leaves one open to a Dutch Book strategy, a series of bets each of which will seem fair to one at the time they are accepted, given one's degrees of belief at that time, but all of which together will guarantee a net loss. Whatever the merits of such an argument, it cannot be said that it gives you any reason to think that your future beliefs are more likely to be right than your present ones. This accounts for the way in which the many counter-examples to Reflection are formulated. They almost all take the form of a case in which we have good epistemic reason not to trust some future belief of ours. For example, Reflection would have me believe now that I am made of glass, conditionally on my so believing in the future. If I come to believe that I will be hypnotized into believing that I am made of glass, I ought to adopt that belief unconditionally now. Whatever non-epistemic reasons, such as avoidance of a Dutch Strategy, can be given in favor of Reflection, however, they will surely pale into insignificance where we have such good epistemic reason to reject the expertise of our future self in this way.[12]

There is, however, an epistemic reason that supports at least a qualified version of Reflection. Putting the matter very crudely, age brings wisdom. Our future selves will have access to more information, and will have had more time to reason, to test, to check and so on, than our current selves. Knowing this gives us good, epistemic reason to treat our future selves as experts. How to make this less crude? That is a complex task which I will not attempt fully to discharge here. I shall confine myself to a few remarks intended to forestall some immediate objections to my claim and to indicate some of the issues that will be important in a refinement of it. 1) As noted, there are numerous counter-examples to Reflection, most of the kind illustrated above. In discussing the notion of conditional belief near the beginning of this paper, I said that if one believes p conditionally on q, then if one learns that q and learns nothing that affects the conditional belief, one should come to believe p unconditionally (if one does not already). The current counter-examples are cases in which the very hypothesis, for example, that I will believe that I am made of glass as a result of hypnosis, includes information that, if I were to learn it, would absolve me from a rational obligation to believe now that I am made of glass. It is information that by itself undermines the conditional belief. They are, therefore, not really counter-examples to the principle at all.[13]

2) I have described one of the effects of age on our belief systems. But clearly there are other, less salutary effects. My defense of Reflection is based on what we have good reason to believe about our future beliefs. To the extent that any future, unpleasant vicissitudes of my beliefs are unpredictable, they pose no threat to the principle. The key to refining Reflection must therefore begin by examining what we have good reason to expect about ways in which our future beliefs will not be superior to our present ones. This will involve a number of issues one of which, I suggest, is our methods of belief acquisition and their relative merits in different temporal contexts. For example, beliefs about my immediate environment now, based on perception, will generally not be inferior to beliefs about it in the future that are based on memory. One's knowledge of the ways in which perception and memory are most reliable, most liable to error, and so on, will thus factor in to the degree to which I should satisfy Reflection with respect to some future belief about my present environment. 3) Issues of memory are particularly significant. This is both because we know we will forget many things, such as what color the walls are in the corridor outside today; and because, even if age brings wisdom, it also often brings increased memory loss. To some extent, these issues must be dealt with along the

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lines just suggested. But it should be noted that forgetfulness, as such, is not a problem for Reflection unless its extent is so great that it undermines the rationality of whatever beliefs remain. Reflection tells us to treat our future opinions as expert; what forgetfulness does is to induce a lack of opinion. Reflection says nothing about what I should now believe about the color of the walls conditionally on the hypothesis that I will later forget what color they are.

To support my claims in the preceding paragraph, and to allay fears that my defense of Reflection will have it degenerate into a hopelessly complex and *ad hoc* affair, notice that analogous considerations apply to taking anyone as an expert. If I know B to be a prominent astronomer, I may take her as an expert in that area. But my taking her as an expert is consistent with my not adopting her belief on something if I also have reason to believe that she has formed that belief in some pathological way, such as having been hypnotized. Secondly, if she, through complex calculations, predicts that there is now an eclipse while I am looking up and seeing the moon with my own eyes, I should not abandon my belief and adopt hers. My perception of my present environment trumps her beliefs about it formed on the basis of complex calculations. Nor does her failure to have a belief about something (an analogue of my future forgetfulness about something) pose a problem for my taking her as an expert with respect to what she does have beliefs about, unless her lack of beliefs is so great that it undermines the expertise of whatever beliefs she does have.

Persons as MEUs

So much, then, for the rationality of satisfying Reflection. But this does not quite get us to the conclusion that a person is an MEU. The point of describing something as an expert epistemic unity is to designate it as an entity, a constitutive norm of which is the obtaining of some Epistemic Principle of Unity among its members. We therefore have two further questions to address before we can claim to have supported the thesis that a person is an MEU. First, is the satisfaction of Reflection a constitutive norm of persons? Second, what are the 'members' of a person? Let me briefly say something about the second question before dealing with the more interesting first question.

In Expert above, we were dealing with a principle that related two different functions, identified as P_A and P_B to indicate that one was the (conditional) degree-of-belief function for a person A and the other a degree-of-belief function for a person B. It was harmless there to identify the domains of the functions, the beliefs of a given person, with the people whose beliefs they were. Thus, we took the principle to relate the people whose beliefs the principle concerned. Reflection, however, introduces a temporal subscript to the functions and concerns the case in which the person related to one of the functions is identical to that related to the other. Thus, we can no longer treat the functions, or their domains, as interchangeable simply with persons. What, then, should we say that Reflection relates? We can stick to talking about the domains of the functions involved, belief systems, but now indexed to a time; or we can talk about temporal parts of persons, choosing as the relevant parts those through which there is no change of belief; or we can talk about persons at times. The first of these options is ontologically acceptable, but would greatly complicate the way in which we would have to express the idea of a person as a kind of group. The second option most neatly suggests that idea, but is ontologically rebarbitive to my ears (though not equally so, I know, to everyone's). The third option is the most natural way to talk but most obscures the idea of a person as a group since it uses the concept of a person in describing the alleged members. Nonetheless, I shall, in the remainder of this paper, adopt this more natural way speaking, using it as shorthand for something that could be more precisely stated without circularity.

Coming to the first question, is it right that satisfaction of Reflection is a constitutive norm of persons? This question has two parts, corresponding to the two conditions on being a constitutive norm. First, must a number of persons at times be related by Reflection at least to some extent if they are to constitute a person? The question is somewhat vague as stated. Reflection might be satisfied 'to some extent' by a group of persons at times if at least one of the persons satisfies

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Reflection with respect to at least one other person at a later time. Alternatively, one might require that every person at a time take at least some future person as an expert, or that every person at a time take every future person as an expert on some things, and so on. In order to avoid becoming overly scholastic, let us try to get to the heart of the matter, sacrificing a little precision to do so. As suggested in the epistemic argument for Reflection above, its plausibility is founded on the fact that, in normal conditions, the passing of time is a good thing for the beliefs of a person. The question of whether Reflection provides a constitutive norm for a person will depend on the extent to which knowledge of this fact (and of the various provisos to it that I briefly indicated) is bound up with what it is to be a person. Satisfying Reflection generally means that one takes oneself to be progressing in the world in an appropriate way, epistemically speaking. It seems to me completely implausible that an entity that could not assume some progress in its beliefs over time could be a person. Pursuing courses of study, investigating things, planning various projects and strategizing all depend on having some confidence in one's future superiority as a believer. If this is right then the first condition for Reflection's being a constitutive norm of a person, that nothing can be a person that does not at least to some minimal extent satisfy the principle, is met. The second condition requires that something is a better example of a person than another if Reflection is satisfied to a greater degree in the one than in the other. The notion of something's being a better example of a person (I do *not* say a better person) than another might be thought to be tendentious and I cannot do it justice here. But one need only think of the fact that the less one satisfied Reflection, the less sense it would make to embark on various courses of action that would be frustrated by a future failure in my beliefs by current standards. The greater the extent to which personhood, therefore, goes with such courses of action, the greater the extent to which it requires satisfaction of Reflection. Conversely, an inability to trust our future selves leads us to try and direct the actions of those future selves as if they were others. We must, as it were, go outside oursevles – through enlisting the help of others, binding ourselves to the mast, signing over power of attorney – to come back at our future selves from the outside, as if those selves were others.[14] The more this happened in a person's life, the less we could successfully see there the life of a single person. I therefore conclude that Reflection does serve as a constitutive norm for persons and hence that persons are multiple-expert epistemic unities.

Some Peculiarities of Persons as MEUs

A comparison of persons with, say, the MEU constituted by the children's game of Telephone brings out a couple of interesting features of persons as MEUs. First, in the Telephone example, the natural facts that underlie the taking of one person as an expert by another mean that expertise rises the further back in the chain one goes. What bestows expertise is closeness to the original source. The expertise is backward looking; wisdom is found most in past generations. Thus, so to speak, the Ancients are superior to the Moderns. This is a pattern often found in the context of traditions that originate with some kind of revelation or founding act and is associated with a degenerationist view of history.[15] In the case of persons, however, the relevant natural facts bestow the greater expertise on the later members of the group, selves at later times. Since what is at issue is not fidelity to some original source of knowledge, but rather on-going investigation and acquisition of information, expertise belongs to the future. The MEU in this case is forward looking. On the broad historical canvas, persons suggest not the decaying traditions modeled by Telephone but the triumphant march of progress. Peirce's identification of truth with the opinion of scientists at the end of inquiry would provide a striking reason for deference to future opinion: it approaches truth by definition! While the same cannot be said for the epistemic progress of a single individual, the analogy is illuminating.

A second point of comparison between persons and Telephone is equally striking. In expert unities that are essentially backward looking, as in Telephone, or that are not essentially temporally structured, as in, say, the case of the Catholic Church and the Pope, there is no reason in principle why the opinions of the expert should

 https://doi.org/10.3366/epd.2005.2.1.57 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not be available to the non-experts. In the case of forward-looking MEUs such as persons, however, learning the opinion of the relevant experts means learning things about the future. Although knowledge of the future is not impossible to come by, it is probably much rarer than knowledge of the present or past. But the real issue is that there is something particularly bizarre about the idea of coming to have knowledge of one's own future opinions. For the most part, we have no specific knowledge of our future opinions, unless we simply assume, as we often do with good reason, that they will be the same as our current opinions.

As the typical counter-examples to Reflection suggest, cases in which we might have some reason to expect a particular future opinion to differ from a current one often rely on some pathology in the acquisition of the future opinion. In such cases, Reflection does not apply, as we have seen. Thus, we might say that as a constraint on current categorical opinion (as opposed to conditional opinion), Reflection is either useless or bad. We cannot converge on the experts' opinions by finding them out – we must simply grow into those opinions at our own pace.

Notes

1 Prominent practitioners of this approach include Margaret Gilbert and Raimo Tuomela.

2 The Model is explained in his *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991).

3 A fuller treatment can be found in Simon Evnine, "Epistemic Unities," *Erkenntnis* 59, (2003): 365-88.

4 Obviously, the notion of a constitutive norm itself needs a good deal of clarification which I cannot provide here. For those familiar with these cases, the following might provide examples of how the notion works: Davidson's views on the relations between principles of rationality and belief systems; Aristotelian views about forms of life and natural kinds; Wolterstorff's views on scores and musical works.

5 Here I refine the terminology introduced in my "Epistemic Unities," in which I use the more generic term "epistemic unity" as a name for those groups I am here calling "expert epistemic unities."

6 I do not here offer these remarks as an analysis of the notional of conditional belief, though in fact they are close to Stalnaker's analysis in *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

7 For the purposes of this paper I pretend what I do not believe, that degrees of belief are subjective probabilities and that full belief is sufficiently high degree of belief. Without the second assumption, two sets of principles would be needed to capture taking someone as an expert, one for degrees of belief and one for full belief.

8 Perhaps one might also take someone as an expert for no reason at all – one simply comes to believe what she does whenever one finds out what that is. I suspect that many cases of taking someone as an expert for non-epistemic reasons will shade off into this less thoughtful phenomenon, but here is not the place to investigate the moral psychology involved.

9 This might be thought to be hinted at by these words of the Catechism: "with this Church [i.e. Rome]… the faithful everywhere, must *necessarily* be in accord" (Catechism, 1994, p. 834, my emphasis).

10 Bas van Fraassen, "Belief and the Will," *Journal of Philosophy* 81, (1984): 235-56.

11 In addition to the paper just cited, see also his "Belief and the Problem of Ulysses and the Sirens," *Philosophical Studies 77*, (1995): 7-37.

12 A good example of this reaction to Reflection can be found in David Christensen, "Clever Bookies and Coherent Beliefs," *Philosophical Review* 100, (1991): 229-47.

13 Christensen presents another counter-example that may seem not to be covered by what I have just said (*op. cit.*, p. 236). In it, I hypothesize that I will later believe I am the Messiah. He thinks it would be irrational for me now to believe that I am the Messiah conditionally on this hypothesis.

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And here, there seems to be nothing in the hypothesis about being hypnotized, drugged, etc. However, from my current point of view, there are some things that I could not believe unless I were crazy or subject to some kind of manipulation. That I am the Messiah is one of them. So, from my current point of view, the mere hypothesis that I shall believe that I am the Messiah implies that I will be crazy, drugged, etc., and this does invalidate the conditional belief. To see this, just imagine the counter-example as described being offered to someone who now thinks it a genuine possibility that she is the Messiah (though she doesn't currently think she is).

14 This is illustrated by the famous case of Ulysses and the Sirens, and by the case of the Nineteenth-Century Russian discussed by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 327-8.

15 For some discussion of degenerationist versus progressivist views of history and their connections with theories of 'the progress of the mind' see my "Hume, Conjectural History, and the Uniformity of Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31, (1993): 589-606.

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 https://doi.org/10.3366/epd.2005.2.1.57 Published online by Cambridge University Press