CHAPTER NINE

Being Intellectually Dependable for Groups

This book began with the seemingly mundane observation that we are pervasively dependent on our fellow inquirers in our inquiries. This observation led to the book’s focal question of what it takes to be the sort of person on whom others can depend in their inquiries, and an answer to this question has been pursued through focusing on a neglected suite of virtues that contribute distinctively to making a person intellectually dependable. With a few exceptions, most of the discussion in the book so far could be read as giving the impression that the “others” in view here are always other isolated individual inquirers—that the focus of the book is on being the sort of person on whom one’s fellow individual inquirers can depend in their individual inquiries. Yet, however tempting it may be, this impression is misleading. For, just as it is a mundane truth that other individual inquirers may depend on us in their individual inquiries, it is an equally mundane truth that other groups of inquirers may depend on us in their collective practices of inquiry. Being intellectually dependable—being the sort of person on whom others can depend in their inquiries—must include being intellectually dependable when fellow groups of inquirers are dependent upon one, and not only when it is fellow individual inquirers depending on one in isolation. This chapter therefore turns to the question of what is distinctively involved in being intellectually dependable when one is depended upon by groups of inquirers and not only by individual inquirers in isolation.

The chapter has three sections. In Section 1, I discuss an important objection to the account of intellectual dependability I have developed so far that focuses on how this account might accommodate a broad conception of epistemic agency. I argue that this objection can be answered in an appealing way if we clarify, as above, that the “others” who can depend on the intellectually dependable person include groups of inquirers and not only individual inquirers. In Section 2, I discuss the idea, strongly confirmed in the growing literature on collective epistemology, that the inquiry-relevant features of groups such as their beliefs and intellectual character traits can be importantly different from analogous inquiry-relevant features of individuals. Insofar as this idea is correct, it helps to illustrate the distinctive demands upon the intellectually dependable person when groups of inquirers depend upon them. In Section 3, I briefly illustrate how each of the five virtues of intellectual dependability that have been my focus in Part II of this text makes distinctive demands of its possessor when it is groups of inquirers rather than individual inquirers who are in the position of intellectual dependence. The three sections work together to illustrate both the importance of being intellectually dependable for groups of inquirers and some of the distinctive demands of being intellectually dependable for groups of inquirers.

1. Intellectual Dependability and a Broad Conception of Epistemic Agency

Throughout this book, I have conceptualized intellectual dependability in terms of aiding others in their inquiries. And, more specifically, I have conceptualized aiding others in their inquiries as aiding others to achieve legitimate aims of inquiry, such as obtaining true beliefs, avoiding false beliefs, adopting rational attitudes, conducting inquiries in accordance with intellectual skill or virtue, and achieving understanding. Many contemporary epistemologists might summarize this idea by saying that my conceptualization focuses on aiding others in their exercise of epistemic agency. They would claim that what it is for a person to exercise their epistemic agency is for them to take steps to pursue exactly these kinds of aims in their inquiries (cf. Olson 2015). So, the intellectually dependable person could be thought of as the sort of person on whom others can depend to enhance their epistemic agency.

Yet, other epistemologists—perhaps a minority—might at this juncture raise an objection to the account of intellectual dependability I’ve offered. For, they propose that epistemic agency includes much more than suggested here. For them, epistemic agency is characteristically exercised not only when one takes steps to pursue achieving the kinds of aims identified in the previous paragraph for oneself in one’s own inquiries, but it is also exercised when one contributes toward others’ attainment of such aims, and when one works with others to achieve such aims together. Thus, if being intellectually dependable only involves supporting fellow inquirers in attaining the aims of inquiry identified in the previous paragraph, then it cannot be identified with supporting others in exercising their epistemic agency. Key dimensions of others’ epistemic agency have been overlooked. The intellectually dependable person needs to be the sort of person on whom others can depend not only in their attempts to achieve the aims identified in the previous paragraph, but they need to be the sort of person on whom others can depend in their efforts to help others achieve such aims and in their efforts to work together with others to achieve such aims cooperatively.

One good recent example of an epistemologist who conceptualizes epistemic agency in the broader way that can give rise to this objection is Miranda Fricker (2007). Her widely discussed work on epistemic injustice includes a detailed treatment of a kind of epistemic injustice she calls testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer accords insufficient credibility to a speaker on account of a prejudice they have regarding the latter’s social identity. What is important for us here is Fricker’s diagnosis of the harm involved in testimonial injustice. She proposes that in cases of testimonial injustice, the speaker is harmed as a knower or in their capacity as a knower. It’s not, however, that the speaker is injured in their capacity for attaining the aims of their own individual inquiries. Rather, they are injured in their capacity to contribute to the collective pursuit of knowledge. They are prevented from serving in the role of an informant (see especially ch.6).

Fricker stresses that serving in the role of informant, contributing to collective practices of inquiry, is part of what it is to be a knower, and is part of what is involved in exercising one’s epistemic agency. Here she follows Edward Craig (1990), who argues that the original concept of knowledge was focused on precisely this sort of function. For Craig and Fricker, the original concept of one who knows was the concept of a person who can serve capably in the role of informant. Since this is what being a knower centrally involves, injuring a person’s ability to contribute to collective practices of inquiry is injuring them as a knower. Epistemic agency centrally involves contributing toward such practices.

This broad conception of epistemic agency, to repeat, appears to raise a challenge to the conception of intellectual dependability that I have developed throughout this book. For, if being intellectually dependable involves only aiding others in the pursuit of achieving the aims of their own individual inquiries, then it does not include aiding others in contributing to collective practices of inquiry, and so does not include aiding others in exercising all dimensions of epistemic agency. Indeed, it doesn’t include aiding others in exercising the most central dimensions of epistemic agency. Somewhat paradoxically, being intellectually dependable doesn’t include aiding others to themselves be intellectually dependable for other others.

I think this objection is an important one. What is most important about it is that it is surely correct in insisting that part of being intellectually dependable is being the sort of person on whom others can depend in their attempts to contribute to collective practices of inquiry. One way or another, the account of intellectual dependability needs to be developed in such a way as to accommodate this important function, even if we don’t agree with the view of Fricker and Craig that contributing to collective practices of inquiry is central to what it is to be a knower or to exercising one’s epistemic agency. Somehow the account of intellectual dependability must allow that part of what it is to be intellectually dependable is to be the sort of person on whom others can depend when they are seeking to be good informants—indeed, even when they are seeking to be intellectually dependable.

Fortunately, there are multiple ways to accommodate this concern. The approach that I prefer involves appealing to the idea, central to this chapter, that it is not only individual inquirers but groups of inquirers that depend on us in their inquiries. Take a case in which a fellow inquirer is attempting to contribute to collective practices of inquiry—for example, by sharing their testimony with fellow inquirers in an effort to contribute to these others’ gaining knowledge. If this fellow inquirer is dependent upon you in these attempts—if there are ways you can help them to make the contributions they are aiming to make—then likewise the potential recipients of their testimony are dependent upon you. Indeed, both they and the recipients of their testimony are together dependent on you in this case. The group of inquirers as a whole is dependent upon you in their work of inquiry, and this dependence involves both the dependence of the testifier and the dependence of the potential recipients of testimony. The testifier and the recipients depend on you to facilitate the testimonial exchange, thereby enhancing their collective practice of inquiry.

Now, imagine we stick with the original conception of what it is to be intellectually dependable. To be intellectually dependable is to be the sort of person on whom others can depend in their inquiries. Specifically, it is to be the sort of person on whom others can depend for aid in their pursuit of achieving legitimate aims in their inquiries, such as attaining true beliefs, knowledge, et cetera. Imagine now that we clarify, and indeed emphasize, that the “others” in view here include other groups of inquirers and not only other individual inquirers. Being intellectually dependable involves being dependable for dependent groups of inquirers and for dependent individual inquirers. Now return to the case we just considered. Given this clarified conception of what it takes to be intellectually dependable, it will follow that being intellectually dependable in this case will require being such that the group consisting of the testifier and the recipients of their testimony can depend on you for aid in their inquiry. But, being such that this group can depend on you in this case will require being such that you can facilitate their testimonial exchange. And being such that you can facilitate their testimonial exchange requires that you can be depended upon by the testifier in their efforts to contribute to group practices of inquiry as well as by the recipients of this testimony in their pursuit of collective inquiry.

The point generalizes. If being intellectually dependable includes being the sort of person on whom groups of inquirers can depend in their inquiries, then being intellectually dependable will include being the sort of person on whom fellow individual inquirers can depend in their efforts to contribute to collective practices of inquiry. For, any case in which a fellow inquirer is potentially engaged in contributing to collective practices of inquiry is a case in which there is a group of inquirers that is potentially engaged in inquiry. And if this fellow inquirer is dependent on you in making their contributions, then the group too will be dependent upon you in their collective practices of inquiry. So, one way to accommodate the very legitimate concern that could be raised by someone like Fricker or Criag who maintains an expansive conception of epistemic agency is to clarify, and indeed to stress, that the “others” in view in the account of intellectual dependability offered in this book include group others and not only individual others.

The present approach to responding to this important objection can be strengthened if we clarify that groups of inquirers can depend upon us in their practices of inquiry in different ways. In some cases, a group of fellow inquirers depends upon us in their practices of inquiry, even though there is hardly anything like a mutually acknowledged group aim in the practice of inquiry. In fact, groups of inquirers can depend upon us to facilitate their collective practices of inquiry when the group they constitute is only very loosely recognizable as a group at all, and even when the members of this “group” are committed not to common aims in inquiry but to opposing one another in their aims as inquirers. We might imagine, for example, that in the testimony case described earlier there is only one potential recipient of the testimony and they are committed to ignoring the would-be testifier. In this case, the would-be testifier and the would-be recipient of the testimony hardly form a cohesive group with shared aims in inquiry. Yet, they are in a position to engage in collective practices of inquiry. And there are legitimate aims they could and should adopt in this collective practice. As such they can depend on their fellow inquirers to enhance their collective practices of inquiry.

It is important that such cases are included as proper targets in our conceptualization of the intellectually dependable person. When we say that the intellectually dependable person can be depended upon both by fellow groups of inquirers, these loosely constituted “groups” must be included as well. Any collection of individual inquirers who are in a position to engage in collective practices of inquiry and whose engagement in these practices can be enhanced by the intellectually dependable person’s efforts is to be included among the class of “others” who can depend upon the intellectually dependable person. The intellectually dependable person is the sort of person who can be depended upon by fellow individual inquirers and by fellow groups of inquirers in their pursuit of legitimate aims of individual and collective inquiry.

Yet, in addition to the aforementioned ways in which groups of inquirers may depend upon us in their inquiries, we should also note that there are other quite different ways that groups can depend on us in their inquiries. In these other cases, there is more of a cohesive group that exists, and it has more in the way of shared group aims for group inquiry. These cases too must be included among the kinds of cases in which intellectual dependability has application. And, in fact, these cases arguably provide some reason for favoring the present approach to responding to the focal objection of this section over rival approaches.

To see this, consider a salient alternative approach which could have been taken. On the alternative approach, we alter the conception of intellectual dependability developed earlier in this book so that the intellectually dependable person is conceptualized as someone on whom other individual inquirers can depend in exercising their epistemic agency *in the broad sense*. Thus, being intellectually dependable would involve not only being such that fellow individual inquirers can depend on one to offer them aid in achieving the aims of their own individual inquiries, but being such that they can depend on one to offer them aid in their efforts to contribute to collective practices of inquiry in the ways envisioned by Fricker and Craig. Notably, this approach, too, would accommodate the concern for the account of intellectual dependability raised by our focal objection. And it would make clear how intellectual dependability has application in the kinds of cases just considered in which a loosely defined group depends upon us in its collective practices of inquiry. For each of the individuals in the group in this case can depend upon the intellectually dependable person to enhance their individual epistemic agency in the broad sense. And this seems all that is needed in these cases.

Yet, arguably, this approach does not accommodate as well as the approach favored here cases in which a more cohesive group depends upon us in the group’s pursuit of shared legitimate group aims in inquiry. In these cases, we may be in a position to influence a group’s inquiry more directly than by enabling each of its members to better exercise their individual epistemic agency in contributing to the group’s inquiry in the ways Fricker and others have in mind. Groups may depend on us in this more direct way to help them shape their views as a group; they may depend on us to evaluate whether their group views are justified; they may depend on us to identify and evaluate the group processes they have used in forming their views; they may depend on us to enable them to gain group understanding; they may depend on us to enable them to cultivate or exercise group intellectual virtues. In these cases, intellectual dependability will plausibly call for virtuous attentiveness to and support of group-level features in group inquiries, and this attentiveness and support will involve more than excellence in supporting each group member’s individual exercise of epistemic agency. What is needed in addition, plausibly, is attentiveness to group epistemic agency.

In fact, attentiveness to group epistemic agency in these cases will plausibly regulate attentiveness to the epistemic agency of individual group members. The intellectually dependable person will often influence group epistemic agency by influencing the epistemic agency of group members. Yet, which group members’ epistemic agency the intellectually dependable person decides to influence in order to influence group epistemic agency, and how they go about doing this, will be regulated by their motivation to influence group epistemic agency. In cases in which the intellectually dependable person is depended upon directly by a cohesive group in the pursuit of its aims in inquiry, the intellectually dependable person’s focus will be primarily on influencing the group’s epistemic agency, and secondarily on influencing group members’ epistemic agency as needed to secure this aim. In some cases, the intellectually dependable person will act so as to influence the epistemic agency of the group without acting so as to influence the epistemic agency of any particular group members, thinking that some group members or others will be able to act upon their influence so as to secure the desired group outcome. In other cases, the intellectually dependable person will themselves be a group member or even a group leader, and can themselves act so as to bring about the desired group outcome without needing to influence this outcome via influencing the epistemic agency of other group members. In all cases, it is important that the intellectually dependable person is concerned to promote the group’s epistemic agency and not just the group members’ epistemic agency. For this reason, the “others” included among the proper targets of intellectual dependability must not include only other individuals, as on the rival approach to responding to our focal objection considered here. The intellectually dependable person must instead be conceptualized, as proposed here, as someone on whom both individual inquirers and group inquirers can depend in their inquiries; they must be capable of enhancing both the epistemic agency of other individuals and the epistemic agency of groups. By clarifying our conception of the intellectually dependable person in this way, we can both answer the focal objection of this section and can accommodate better than rival approaches to answering this objection cases in which a cohesive group depends on the intellectually dependable person in a relatively direct way.

1. Intellectual Dependability and Collective Epistemology

The observations at the end of the previous section about the potential importance of attending to group-level features of group inquiries leads us naturally to the subject of this second section. Here my focus is on the way in which the growing literature in collective epistemology strongly suggests that group-level features relevant for group inquiry are not always just straightforward summations of analogous inquiry-relevant features of individual group members. Whether a group holds a view is not just a matter of whether most or all of its members hold that view; whether a group’s view is justified is not just a matter of whether most or all of its members justifiedly hold that view; the process a group has used in its inquiry is not just a matter of the processes its members have used in their inquiries; and so on. This is important for our context here. For, it reveals that attending well to the group-level features relevant for group inquiries involves more than attending to analogous features of individual group members. Given the distinctiveness of group-level features relevant for group inquiries, there are distinctive demands upon the intellectually dependable person when it is groups, rather than individuals, that are dependent upon them.

In the background of most research in collective epistemology is a fundamental contrast between summativist and non-summativist conceptions of group epistemic phenomena. Summativist conceptions propose that for a group to possess some epistemically relevant feature F is for its members to possess F. For example, for a group to have a belief is for its members to have that belief, or for a group to have knowledge is for its members to have knowledge. Non-summativist views propose that group epistemic features sometimes diverge from the features of their members. A group’s possessing a feature F is not always merely a matter of its members possessing F. Indeed, in some cases, a group may even possess a feature F without any of its members possessing F.

For instance, in the literature on group belief, Margaret Gilbert (2004; Gilbert and Pilchman 2014) has long defended a joint commitment model of belief. According to this model, a group has a belief that p just in case its members are jointly committed to the group’s believing that p. Gilbert stresses that the members of a group may be jointly committed to p being the group’s belief, however, without them themselves believing that p. And, indeed, she has argued that members’ individual beliefs that p are neither necessary nor sufficient for group belief that p.

Members’ beliefs that p are not sufficient for group belief because the individual beliefs in p of group members in isolation, despite their agreement, does not provide the kind of mutuality and shared agency that can be necessary for generating group belief that p. The fact that some individuals all individually believe that p doesn’t automatically make it the case that their group believes that p. The group may not have given any thought to p as a group, and this may be necessary for their having a group belief regarding p.

On the other hand, members may be willing to allow for p to be their group’s belief despite themselves privately not believing that p. This can occur, for instance, when a group forms its beliefs in accordance with certain restrictive procedures that its individual members needn’t follow in their own belief formation. As members of such a group committed to participating in group belief formation in accordance with the relevant rules, group members may together reach a collective belief that p despite refraining from believing p as individuals. The collective belief that p may, to be sure, put some pressure on the group members to behave in ways not directly in tension with their believing that p. And in this way collective belief may exercise some influence over individual belief. But the two are not the same thing.

Now, to be fair, not everyone working in collective epistemology agrees with Gilbert that the phenomenon she is describing is collective belief. Some have argued that it is instead collective acceptance (e.g., Wray 2001). Yet, even on such a view, it remains the case that there is a collective state that is typically arrived upon via some process of inquiry, and which exercises significant influence over the behavior of both groups and individuals. On this basis, the state, whether conceptualized as belief or not, is recognizable as a collective epistemic state (cf. Bird 2014), and one which has analogues in individual epistemic states without consisting in a summation of such analogous states.

The existence of such collective epistemic states is important for theorizing about intellectual dependability. For, it implies that for a person who wishes to be intellectually dependable for groups in their formation of these belief-like attitudes, they must not only attend to analogous features of group members—they must attend to this distinctively group-level attitude. Doing so will require that they recognize and operate in light of the fact that this group attitude requires a kind of mutuality and shared agency among group members not secured via group members’ own private formation of beliefs. It likewise requires that they recognize and operate in light of the fact that the formation of the group attitude may be governed by rules of inquiry distinctive to the group. Influencing group belief-like attitudes will sometimes involve attending to and supporting these kinds of features, whereas influencing individuals’ beliefs in isolation does not.

The summativism vs. non-summativism debate recurs with respect to other group epistemic features. Jennifer Lackey (2016), for example, argues that a group’s having a justified belief that p is not the same as any combination of its members having justified beliefs that p. Group justified belief requires something more than the justified belief in p of some combination of its members. Lackey doesn’t argue in a way comparable to Gilbert that groups can have justified beliefs without any of their members having justified beliefs. But she does maintain that group justified belief consists in something more than group member justified belief.

The main reasons Lackey gives for this non-summative perspective on group justified belief have to do with the fact that the evidence that group members have which bears upon the justification of their individual beliefs in a proposition p may differ from that of their fellow group members and may be in tension with it. For example, some group members may have a belief that p justified on the basis of their justified belief that q, where others have a belief that p justified on the basis of their justified belief that r, where q and r are incompatible. In this kind of case, it seems plausible that the conflicting evidence the group members possess undermines the group’s justification in p despite the fact that the members are each individually justified in their beliefs that p. And other similar cases can arise as well. Because of this, Lackey proposes an account of group justified belief that p that requires a certain kind of coherence within the evidential bases of group members’ justified beliefs, and that ensures that full disclosure of group member evidence would not result in the discovery of defeating evidence for p.

Here again, what is important for us is not so much the details of Lackey’s specific account of group justified belief, but some of the more general points she makes about differences between epistemic evaluations of group beliefs and analogous epistemic evaluations of group member beliefs. There are positive epistemic evaluations of group beliefs that require more than is required by analogous positive epistemic evaluations of group member beliefs. Even though group members may justifiedly believe a proposition p, there may be analogous positive epistemic properties that the group belief in p lacks because of a lack of coherence in the evidential bases of these group member beliefs, or because if the group were to fully disclose their evidence it would thereby uncover defeating evidence for p.

In this way, Lackey directs our attention to some phenomena that distinctively arise in the epistemic evaluation of group beliefs. Recognizing and appreciating these phenomena will be important for a person to be intellectually dependable for groups. For a person to be intellectually dependable for groups in promoting their achievement of positive epistemic properties, they must be attentive to these distinctive group-level features. They must be attentive, for instance, to the relations between potentially conflicting evidential bases of group member beliefs. Being attentive to these relations isn’t necessary for supporting the achievement of analogous positive epistemic properties for individuals in isolation—it is a distinctive requirement of cases in which one aims to promote positive epistemic properties for groups.

There is likewise a literature exploring distinctive group processes in inquiry. These are processes that take place in groups and that influence both the formation of group attitudes and group member attitudes, but that do not take place in individuals’ own private inquiries. They are processes involving group member interaction.

For example, groups may exhibit information cascades (Bikhchandani et al 1992). In these cases, individual members in a group update their credences in light of their fellow group members’ credences without taking into account that the latter may have themselves been updated in light of other fellow group member credences. For instance, all but one member of a group may have private information that favors p over not-p, with member X being the only member whose information favors not-p over p. Yet, when X’s fellow group member X + 1 notices that X favors not-p, X + 1 updates their credence to reflect this, ending up themselves favoring not-p. And then group member X + 2 updates their credence to reflect that both X and X + 1 favor not-p. And so on, until the entire group favors not-p despite the private information of almost all members favoring p over not-p.

Likewise, groups can exhibit conformity bias (Asch 1951). This is a bias in which group members publicly espouse the view they perceive to be the dominant view within a group, even if they privately disagree with this view. Their public conformity to the dominant view can mislead their fellow group members, as well as non-group members, to think that support for the dominant view is stronger than it in fact is.

Groups can also be characterized in terms of the tightness or looseness of their information-sharing connections. Some groups are tightly connected, with each group member on average sharing information with more other group members than in shared on average in less tightly connected groups. Tightly connected groups are subject to an important vulnerability: in these groups, misleading evidence is more easily widely shared, and as such consensus on correct views can be harder to build (Zollman 2007).

Groups also can divide epistemic labor (Bird 2014). This can be done more or less well. Individuals can be assigned subtasks for the group that do or do not fit them well, and those who perform subtasks can be situated better or worse in terms of their abilities to communicate with others who perform other relevant subtasks.

In all forms of group inquiry, there is at least some dependence of some inquirers on other inquirers. But inquirers can depend well or poorly on one another. Inquirers can ignore fellow inquirers they shouldn’t ignore, or exhibit prejudice in their treatment of fellow inquirers (cf. Fricker 2007), and so on. Group processes of inquiry will often involve processes of dependence of some inquirers on other inquirers that can be improved.

In all these ways and others, group inquiry differs from isolated individual inquiry. The processes that an individual inquirer uses in conducting private inquiries do not include any of these processes involving group member interaction. Thus, supporting groups in conducting their inquiries in accordance with sound processes for inquiry involves distinctive elements when compared with supporting individuals in conducting their private inquiries in accordance with sound processes for these inquiries. In order to be intellectually dependable for groups by supporting their employment of sound processes of inquiry, a person will need to attend to distinctive group processes of inquiry such as those identified here. Chiefly, this involves attentiveness to the patterns of interaction and dependence between group members in contributing to group inquiry.

Finally, the summativism vs. non-summativism debate recurs with respect to group intellectual character traits. Here the focal question for most researchers has concerned whether or not apt ascriptions of virtues or vices to groups is best understood in terms of some or most of their members possessing these traits as private individuals. Several authors, including Miranda Fricker (2010), Reza Laroodi (2007), and Meghan Byerly and myself (2016) have defended non-summativist views on this question. We have argued that a group’s possession of a virtue or vice may not be best understood in terms of its members’ possession of that virtue or vice.

One way of defending non-summativism for group intellectual character traits parallels the defense of non-summativism for group belief we saw above. Namely, there appear to be cases in which group members’ private intellectual character traits diverge from the analogous group intellectual character traits. This can occur for similar reasons to those which can lead to divergence between members’ beliefs and group beliefs. For instance, group policies and procedures, or values to which members are committed as group members but not as private individuals, can lead group members to behave characteristically in one way as group members but differently independently from the group. Such divergence could manifest, for example, in groups that tend to engage in the virtue Fricker (2007) calls testimonial sensitivity despite the fact that their members as private individuals are largely racist and tend to commit testimonial injustices outside of the group context.

A different and complementary way of defending non-summativism for group intellectual character traits focuses on cases in which a group appears to manifest an intellectual virtue or vice that just isn’t available as a virtue or vice for individuals, because of differences between groups and individuals. The most obvious example of a relevant difference between groups and individuals is that groups have members who interact in the group’s activity of inquiry, whereas individual inquirers do not. As such, if there are any virtues or vices that involve the regulation of group member interaction in the conduct of group inquiry, these may be good candidates for distinctive group intellectual virtues or vices that cannot be possessed by individual inquirers and that do not consist in group members’ possession of these traits as individual inquirers.

Are there any such distinctive group intellectual virtues or vices? Here isn’t the place to undertake a detailed defense of an answer to this question. But I will briefly suggest a few possibilities. We saw above that the distribution of intellectual labor in groups can be done better or worse. As such, we might think that there are group intellectual virtues focused upon the excellent distribution of intellectual labor. What is involved in distributing intellectual labor virtuously in groups? I don’t have a fully worked-out answer to offer, but presumably any fully worked-out answer will want to include the group’s commitment to distributing intellectual labor in a way that promotes its achievement of group aims in inquiry, but that also balances this commitment with a commitment to the intellectual well-being of the group’s members. The group that divides intellectual labor excellently will be skilled in identifying ways that intellectual labor can be divided, skilled in identifying the intellectual strengths and weaknesses of its group members, and skilled in matching its members to fitting portions of the divided group labor. The group will tend to exercise these skills in a way that is governed by motivations to achieve group epistemic goods, and that balances the achievement of these goods with the promotion of epistemic goods for group members.

Similarly, we might imagine a group intellectual virtue that involves empowering group members to contribute well to group inquiry. To contribute well to group inquiry, group members may need to be provided with access to relevant materials, may need training in task-relevant skills, and may need channels of communication whereby they can appropriately influence group inquiry. A group that is excellent at empowering its members to contribute to group inquiry will be attentive to the needs of its group members and motivated to meet these needs so as to advance group inquiry.

In these ways, the case of group character traits appears to parallel the cases of group belief, group justification, and group processes. Group intellectual character traits appear to involve distinctive group-level components that are not components of individual intellectual character traits. Supporting the intellectual virtues of groups and mitigating the intellectual vices of groups requires more than supporting the analogous intellectual virtues of group members and mitigating the analogous intellectual vices of group members. Here again the intellectually dependable person will exhibit skill and concern focused upon distinctively group-level phenomena in their efforts to support the epistemic agency of groups.

This section has taken us on a brief tour of the growing literature in collective epistemology. The main purpose of the tour has been to highlight the fact that this literature consistently emphasizes that the epistemic features of groups do not consist in a mere summation of the analogous epistemic features of their members. Group beliefs, group justification, group processes, and group virtues and vices often consist in more than group members’ possession of analogous features. As such, supporting the epistemic goods of groups requires more than supporting the analogous features of their members. Indeed, in some cases there are group-level features that do not have clear analogues in the group’s members. Being intellectually dependable for groups thus requires attentiveness to these distinctive group-level phenomena. We should expect the person who is intellectually dependable for groups to have some grasp of these facts, and to be motivated and skilled in promoting positive epistemic features of groups. As suggested in the previous section, their motivation and skill devoted to these group features will regulate their motivation and skill in enhancing other group members’ broad epistemic agency.

1. The Virtues of Intellectual Dependability for Groups

My final aim in this chapter is to return to each of the five example virtues of intellectual dependability featured in Part II of this text and to briefly discuss their operation when it is groups of inquirers rather than individual inquirers who are in the position of intellectual dependence. My focus is primarily on the distinctive demands of these virtues when they are directed toward dependent groups of inquirers rather than dependent individuals.

Begin with the virtue of intellectual benevolence. In Chapter Four, we conceptualized this virtue as consisting in a refined motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods for its own sake. We understood this motivation to involve cognitive, affective, and explicitly motivational components. Intellectually benevolent people judge it good for others to attain epistemic goods and for themselves to promote these goods. They have mature views about the relative value of epistemic goods. They tend to experience positive affect when others again epistemic goods and when they help others attain epistemic goods, and they tend to experience negative affect when others fail to attain epistemic goods and when they fail in aiding others to attain epistemic goods. They want to help others’ attain epistemic goods for its own sake.

The most important thing for us to observe here is that when intellectual benevolence is directed toward groups of fellow inquirers, it will include a motivation to promote group epistemic goods. Thus, the intellectually benevolent person will be motivated to promote true and justified group beliefs, the use of reliable processes of inquiry in groups, the display of group intellectual virtues, and excellence in group practices of inquiry more generally. These motivations will include the cognitive, affective, and explicitly motivational components cited above. The intellectually benevolent person will, for example, tend to experience positive affect when groups employ reliable processes or act in accordance with group intellectual virtues, and negative affect when they fail in trying to help groups form true beliefs. They will judge it good to aid groups to engage in better group practices of inquiry. They will want to improve the epistemic lives of groups.

Having these kinds of motivations directed toward group epistemic goods makes demands on the intellectually benevolent person that go beyond the demands of exercising intellectual benevolence toward isolated inquirers. This can be seen if we consider the kinds of group features that intellectually benevolent people will need to attend to if they are to be properly motivated to promote group epistemic goods. For example, we saw in the previous section that group processes of inquiry include processes in which individual inquirers depend on fellow individual inquirers, whereas there is no such dependence between inquirers in cases of isolated individual inquiry. The intellectually benevolent person will recognize this, and will be concerned to aid fellow inquirers in their dependence on one another. They will, for example, tend to experience negative affect when well-positioned testifiers are misunderstood or ignored, and they will judge it good to help others express their ideas clearly to those who depend on them. Likewise, they will be concerned to prevent problematic group processes such as groupthink or information cascades. They will be motivated to help groups divide epistemic labor well. They will be concerned to promote group policies that tend to encourage group intellectual virtue. They will be concerned that groups adequately attend to the different evidential bases of their members so as not to undermine the group’s attainment of positive epistemic properties. And so on. In these ways, the motivations characteristic of intellectual benevolence when directed toward groups of inquirers require a grasp and attentiveness toward group-level features that is not required by intellectual benevolence when it is directed toward individual inquirers in isolation.

Because intellectual benevolence is understood in this way to include both a motivation to promote other individuals’ epistemic goods and a motivation to promote the epistemic goods of groups of inquirers, questions may arise as to the comparative strengths of these motivations. Would an intellectually benevolent person always be more strongly motivated to promote a group’s attaining a true belief p than to promote an individual group member’s attainment of this true belief p, for example, other things being equal? Insisting on an affirmative answer may be too strong. But one fact that we may expect the intellectually benevolent person to be sensitive to is the one observed in the previous section regarding the way in which group attitudes and virtues often exert significant influence over analogous attitudes and virtues of group members. We might then expect that in a broad range of cases, an intellectually benevolent person would prefer to influence the epistemic goods of groups over the epistemic goods of group members, because by doing the former they may also accomplish the latter. Paradoxically, this may lead an intellectually benevolent person on occasion to display seemingly callous behavior toward some group members if influencing their individual epistemic goods is unlikely to influence the group’s epistemic goods, while influencing the group’s epistemic goods might well influence their goods as group members. Without resolving the issue, I wish to acknowledge here the potential scope for conflicts of choice between promoting individual group members’ epistemic goods and promoting a group’s epistemic goods. The intellectually benevolent person will at least have on their radar the possibility for such conflicts and will aim to achieve an acceptable balance in promoting goods of each type. They will have an appreciation of the ways these goods can interact.

Consider next the virtue of intellectual transparency. In Chapter Five, we conceptualized this virtue as a tendency to faithfully and skillfully share one’s perspective on topics of others’ inquiries with these others out of a motivation to promote their epistemic goods. We learned in that same chapter that intellectual transparency partly involves skill in identifying what one’s perspective is, and it partly involves skill in communicating this perspective to dependent others. The intellectually transparent person is able both to dispassionately grasp their own perspective and to help others see what it is like to view things from this perspective. I would suggest here that when it comes to being intellectually transparent for groups, the first of these aspects is largely the same while the second is altered. The skills one exercises in identifying what one’s perspective is are the same whether one is going to share this perspective with a single fellow inquirer or with a group of fellow inquirers. But what it takes to communicate this perspective effectively to a group may differ from what it takes to communicate it effectively to another individual.

The basis for this contention is again to be found in the non-summativist perspective reviewed in the previous section. Because group attitudes and group understanding are not always mere summations of group member attitudes and understandings, effective communication of one’s perspective to a group requires more than effectively communicating one’s perspective to group members one by one. It can require attentiveness to the dynamics whereby group views and understandings are achieved, and tailoring one’s communications so as to interact with these dynamics to yield desirable results. One component of this tailoring is deciding to whom to communicate one’s perspective. Often in groups there will be communication channels one needs to attend to and make use of if one wishes for one’s perspective to be considered. Likewise, communicating one’s perspective effectively may require communicating it to several influential group members at once, all of whom have different and sometimes divergent perspectives. The difficult task here is to communicate one’s perspective in such a way as to maximize understanding of the perspective among these different individuals. Intellectual transparency, when directed toward groups of inquirers, involves the exercise of these distinctive skills that are not required when intellectual transparency is directed toward individual inquirers.

It is also worth noting that some of the obstacles to achieving intellectual transparency may be further exacerbated when it is groups of inquirers rather than lone individual inquirers who are in the position of intellectual dependence. For example, where the temptations to understate or overstate one’s perspective are driven by concerns about one’s reputation, these are only stronger in a group as opposed to an individual context. Those who want to appear better epistemically positioned than others, or those who want to avoid making public mistakes, are likely only to be more strongly influenced by these motivations when communicating in a group context. When intellectual transparency is directed toward groups of inquirers, it requires strong resolve in the face of such temptations.

The transformation of the virtue of communicative clarity in the group context parallels the transformation of intellectual transparency. In Chapter Six, we conceptualized communicative clarity as a tendency to resolve or eliminate sources of ambiguity in one’s communications, out of a motivation to promote others’ epistemic goods. We noted that communicative clarity involves a focus both on one’s communications and on the recipients of these. For, whether a communication is adequately clear depends in part on intrinsic features of the communication and in part upon features of its recipients—whether the communication is likely to be understood adequately by them, or whether it will be problematically ambiguous to them. Thus communicative clarity requires both skill in clarifying one’s communications and attentiveness to those features of others likely to influence whether one’s communications are adequately understood. In much the same way as suggested above with the virtue of intellectual transparency, I suggest that the former component of communicative clarity remains largely the same in the group context, whereas the latter component includes distinctive elements. The tools one has at one’s disposal for clarifying the intrinsic features of one’s communications remain largely the same in the group context. But, the features of recipients one needs to pay attention to in order to ensure that one’s communications are adequately understood may be different from what one would attend to when communicating to isolated individuals.

As we saw with intellectual transparency, part of what one will need to pay attention to in order to ensure that one’s communications are adequately understood by a group are the communication channels within the group. To communicate in such a way that one is adequately understood by the group, whether one is aiming to communicate one’s perspective or something else, one needs to communicate to the right group members at the right time and so on. Likewise, as we saw with intellectual transparency, one may need to craft one’s communications so that they can be adequately understood simultaneously by several different individuals with divergent perspectives. Different group members may have different features that could lead them to misunderstand one’s communications in different ways. In these cases, one needs to deploy one’s skills in clarifying one’s communications in such a way as to maximize the adequate understanding of these among relevant group members. One may also need to be alert to ways that group members’ features may interact to impact whether one’s communications are adequately understood by the group. It may be that no single individual in a group possesses knowledge that would require one to clarify a particular part of one’s communication in order for them to adequately understand it, yet the group collectively possesses sufficient knowledge to require this. This could happen, for instance, if the group members possess different knowledge, but they tend to share this knowledge with one another when deliberating, and the different knowledge they possess, when combined, can lead to confusion over one’s communications. In such a case, one may need to anticipate how the features of the group may interact to prevent one’s communications from being clear to the group, and may need to act preventively to stop this from occurring. In these ways, the virtue of communicative clarity requires attentiveness to distinctive group-level features when it is directed toward groups.

Also similar to intellectual benevolence is the way in which obstacles to communicative clarity can be exacerbated by the group context. The weight the perfectionist communicator puts on their shoulders may only be heavier when they are performing publicly. The temptation to use obscurities in order to make oneself seem profound may be stronger when the prize is being thought profound by a whole group. In the face of such temptations, the virtuously clear communicator remains guided by the aim of ensuring that their communications are adequately clear so that they can be understood by the groups that depend upon them and can thereby enhance these groups’ epistemic goods.

If intellectual transparency and communicative clarity are only partially altered in the group context, the final two virtues—audience sensitivity and epistemic guidance—are more thoroughly transformed. In Chapter Seven we conceptualized audience sensitivity as a tendency to fit one’s communications to the distinctive features of one’s audiences out of a motivation to promote the audience’s epistemic goods. That chapter was probably the most explicit chapter where it was made clear that the intellectually dependable person must be dependable for groups of fellow inquirers and not only isolated individual inquirers. This was made clear when we considered the demands that audience sensitivity makes when one is communicating with a plural audience. Yet, there is more we can say about the ways in which audience sensitivity makes distinctive demands on the intellectually dependable person when it is directed toward group audiences.

We noted in Chapter Seven that the virtuously audience sensitive person will attend to the distinctive needs, interests, perspectives, abilities, and tendencies of their audiences, and will fit their communications to their audiences in light of their grasp of these features. Yet, where it is group audiences that are in view, attending to these features will make distinctive demands on audience sensitivity. For, these features can be composed in part by distinctive group-level features of the sort we considered in the previous section, and thus audience sensitivity will demand attentiveness to these. For example, groups may have needs to improve the group-level processes they are using in their inquiries. They may need to do a better job dividing epistemic labor or engaging in epistemic cooperation. Group intellectual interests and perspectives may be formed through joint commitments involving mutuality and shared agency. Group’s total perspectives will include the various elements of the divergent evidential bases of group members. Groups have abilities for interdependent inquiry that individual inquirers do not, and they may also have tendencies to engage in group inquiry in particular ways that individual inquirers cannot have. Thus, across the board, audience sensitivity makes distinctive demands of its possessor when it is directed toward group audiences. When communicating with groups, the virtuously audience sensitive will attend to these kinds of features of their group audiences and will fit their communications to these audiences in light of their grasp of these features.

Finally, consider epistemic guidance. In Chapter Eight, we conceptualized epistemic guidance as a tendency to offer others aid in making good decisions in their inquiries. The virtuous epistemic guide knows a lot about the processes of inquiry, is skilled in paying attention to the processes that others are employing in their inquiries, and exercises skill in aiding others to make good decisions in their inquiries. All of these elements of epistemic guidance are transformed when this virtue is directed toward groups of inquirers.

To practice virtuous epistemic guidance of groups of inquirers, a person needs to know about group processes of inquiry. They need to have a grasp of the decision points in group inquiries and they need to be able to identify different ways groups could go about practicing inquiry. They also need to pay attention to the processes that particular dependent groups are using in their inquiries. Are group members depending on each other well or poorly? Are the groups implementing policies that encourage intellectually virtuous conduct? What are the different ways available to this particular group whereby they can pursue their epistemic goals? Finally, epistemic guidance of groups also requires skill in influencing group decision-making. How can this particular group be led to conduct its inquiry one way rather than another? Virtuous epistemic guides will know how to influence groups to make good decisions in their inquiries, and will tend to employ this know-how in the service of advancing groups’ epistemic goods.

In these ways, the virtues of intellectual dependability make distinctive demands on their possessors when it is groups rather than individual inquirers who are in the position of intellectual dependence. The fully intellectually benevolent person will value group epistemic goods, including distinctive group-level features that partly constitute or contribute to these goods. The fully intellectually transparent person will be skilled in enabling groups to understand their perspective, exercising distinctive skills in their communication of their perspective to groups. Likewise, the virtuously clear communicator will deploy their skills in clarifying their communications in light of their grasp of distinctive group-level features that may influence whether their communications are adequately understood by groups. The virtuously audience sensitive will attend to a wide variety of group-level phenomena in their attempts to fit their communications to the needs, interests, perspectives, abilities, and tendencies of their group audiences. And the virtuous epistemic guide will employ their knowledge of group-level processes in their attempts to influence groups to make good decisions in their inquiries.

1. Conclusion

Being an intellectually dependable person is not only about being the sort of person that fellow individual inquirers can depend upon in their isolated individual inquiries. It is also about being the sort of person that groups of inquirers can depend upon in their collective practices of inquiry. Yet, being dependable for groups of inquirers makes distinctive demands on the intellectually dependable person. This is because there are distinctive group-level features relevant for the attainment of epistemic goods in group inquiries that the intellectually dependable person must be attentive toward. Indeed, when directed toward dependent groups of inquirers rather than dependent individual inquirers, each of the five virtues of intellectual dependability surveyed in this text is transformed, making distinctive demands of its possessor.

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