

## Normative Distributivity, Zetetic Obligations, and Justified Group Belief

In *What is Justified Group Belief?*, Jennifer Lackey argues for a summative account of justified group belief. A core part of Lackey's case against non-summativism is the following example, IGNORING EVIDENCE (351):

IGNORING EVIDENCE: Philip Morris is a tobacco company. Each of its executives individually have scientific evidence on the health hazards of smoking, viz. its links with lung cancer and heart disease. Each of them have a justified belief that these health hazards provide a reason to put warning labels on their cigarette boxes. However, due to their financial incentives, each executive is unwilling to accept that the company has a reason to put warning labels on their cigarette boxes; therefore, Phillip Morris suspends belief on this matter.

It seems clear that Phillip Morris, as a group, has violated an epistemic norm — and furthermore, that this violation occurred *in virtue of* the individual violations committed by the executives in failing to accept what they know. According to Lackey, however, non-summative views on justified group belief (such as the joint acceptance account) are unable to respect this intuition; they must hold that Phillip Morris has done nothing wrong. In this essay, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding the challenge posed to non-summativism by IGNORING EVIDENCE. In light of this framework, I formulate and defend an alternative response that allows the non-summativist to respect our intuitions without compromising on the non-summativity of justified group belief.

Suppose  $\phi$  is an action or state that can be performed or inhabited by individuals or groups. Suppose further that there exists a normative obligation  $\eta$  such that when  $A$  is  $\phi$ -ing, it ought to  $\eta$ . Then  $\eta$  is *distributive (for  $\phi$ )* if, given a group  $G$  with members  $g_i$ , when  $G$  is  $\phi$ -ing,  $g_i$  ought to  $\eta$  *in virtue of*  $G$ 's  $\phi$ -ing.<sup>1</sup> Informally, a normative obligation is distributive if, whenever one is part of a group subject to that obligation, one is subject to the same obligation as an individual (in virtue of being part of the group).

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an important point: distributivity requires that the reason that the  $g_i$  ought to  $\eta$  cannot be an unrelated one; that is, for distributivity, the fact that  $g_i$  ought to  $\eta$  must be *grounded in* the facts that (1)  $G$  ought to  $\eta$  and (2) the  $g_i$  belong to  $G$ . This strong condition rules out cases where the  $g_i$  just *happen to* ought to  $\eta$ .

This paper is concerned with the distributivity of the following principle:

JB: If  $A$  believes  $p$ ,  $A$  ought to have a justified belief in  $p$ .

Lackey introduces IGNORING EVIDENCE with the intention of drawing out the intuition that JB is distributive for belief (349). For distributivity of  $\eta$  poses a challenge for any non-summative account of  $\eta$ : the thesis that a group  $G$  can fulfill its obligation to  $\eta$  without its members fulfilling their obligation to  $\eta$  (non-summative) is incongruous with the thesis that a group's members are required to  $\eta$  whenever  $G$  is required to  $\eta$  (distributivity).

A non-summative about group justified belief, therefore, must explain why IGNORING EVIDENCE does not show that JB is distributive for belief. One approach is to deny that Phillip Morris has violated any epistemic norm; in other words, they are entirely permitted to suspend (and continue to suspend) their belief in the health hazards of smoking as long as nobody brings the evidence to the group. This approach, in my opinion, is untenable. Something has gone wrong in the case of Phillip Morris; if the non-summative finds herself unable to account for it, her view has a theoretical defect.

IGNORING EVIDENCE definitively shows that *some* relevant normative principle is distributive. Rather than denying this patently obvious fact, a more reasonable choice for the non-summative is to explain that IGNORING EVIDENCE, in fact, shows that a *different* normative principle is distributive. In particular, I suggest that IGNORING EVIDENCE demonstrates the distributivity of the following principle:<sup>2</sup>

ZIP: If  $A$  has a reason<sup>3</sup> to figure out  $p$ ,  $A$  ought to take the necessary means to figure out  $p$ , and  $A$  ought not to take means to prevent  $A$  from figuring out  $p$ .

This is an elaboration on the *zetetic instrumental principle*, and was introduced by Jane Friedman in *The Epistemic and the Zetetic* (503). ZIP draws out the natural distinction

---

<sup>2</sup> Importantly, though this view allows one to maintain that justified group belief is non-summative, it does commit one to the position that justified group *inquiry* is summative. I do not view this as a downside of my account; indeed, I agree that group inquiry is summative.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Epistemic and the Zetetic*, Friedman prefers the term “wants” over “has a reason.” This causes no issues for her, but to avoid ascribing desires to a group (particularly a group that, if it wants anything, wishes to remain ignorant of  $p$ ), we have slightly modified the presentation of the principle here.

between the “time-slice” justification of a belief, with respect to the evidence that an agent has, and inquiry over time, in which an agent gathers evidence relevant to her beliefs.

Under this view, which I call *the ZIP-alternative*, what has gone wrong in IGNORING EVIDENCE is not that Phillip Morris is unjustified in suspending judgement on the hazards of smoking at any fixed moment. Rather, Phillip Morris — and, *qua* distributivity, its members — are not taking the necessary means to figure out if smoking is dangerous, viz. discussing the relevant evidence that they as individuals have. IGNORING EVIDENCE, then, is analogous to the epistemic misstep of an individual who lacks evidence as to the hazards of smoking, and therefore suspends judgement on the matter — but has a book which she knows to be on the topic conveniently within reach. This individual does not err in momentarily reserving her judgement; instead, she errs in not reaching for the book!

An immediate objection arises, however. These two cases are, in a sense, disanalogous. The individual who fails to reach for the book has committed the zetetic wrong of failing to gather relevant and accessible, but still *external*, evidence. On the other hand, the evidence required for Phillip Morris to pass judgement on the hazards of smoking is *internally accessible*. The group does not need to refer to any other resource; rather, it suffices for it to internally aggregate the evidence it “already has.”<sup>4</sup> An objection proceeding along this line might contend, then, that there is no inquiry to be done. Therefore, ZIP is just not applicable here and cannot be used as an explanation for what has gone wrong.

Responding to this objection requires a principled philosophical distinction between evidence that is *internally accessible* and evidence that is *immediately available*. Such a distinction will allow one to make sense of *internal inquiry*; it will be this sort of inquiry, then, which is subject to the constraints of ZIP in the case of Phillip Morris. Separating these two categories of evidence, however, can seem ad-hoc, in the sense that this separation seems

---

<sup>4</sup> The quotes here indicate that I do not accept this characterization; I believe that there is an important — indeed, *the* important sense — in which the group does *not* have the evidence of its individual members.

to only arise in the case of group beliefs. In particular, introducing them to defend non-summativism may appear to amount to a rather complicated way of begging the question. I contend, however, that this dichotomy arises even in questions about individual belief. Consider, for example, the following case:

MIND PALACE: *M* is a skilled competitive memorizer trained in the *mind palace* or *method of loci* technique. At some point, *M* learned evidence *E*, sufficient for a justified belief in proposition *p*, and stored it in her mind palace. Since then, however, she has forgotten *E* (in the sense of removing it from her ordinary short- and long-term memory); it now only exists in her mind palace. In particular, while *M* remembers that evidence relevant to *p* exists in her mind palace, she has forgotten both its content and whether it affirms, rather than defeats, *p*.

I contend that *M* is justified, in the time-slice sense, in suspending judgement on *p*. It is only by aggregating her internally accessible evidence, viz. taking a stroll through her mind palace, that *E* becomes available as justification for *p*. *M*, then, is in the same epistemic state as our book-avoider earlier: she is justified in reserving judgement, but if she has a reason to want to figure out *p*, she ought to enter her mind palace and look around for *E*. Unlike our book-avoider, however, this case *is* analogous to Phillip Morris. In particular, MIND PALACE validates the existence of internal inquiry. In so doing, it shows that Phillip Morris *does* have some inquiring to do, regardless of the fact that the necessary evidence is internally accessible, and thus diffuses any objection to ZIP's relevance.

There is a second objection, however, of a more theoretical nature. The above discussion has shown that it is *possible* to maintain the ZIP-alternative. But why should we *prefer* this account? What is the theoretical or explanatory benefit of the philosophical position that ZIP, not JB, is distributive?

The core reason to prefer the ZIP-alternative is that it allows for a symmetric treatment of not only the two Phillip Morris cases (IGNORING EVIDENCE and FABRICATING EVIDENCE) introduced by Lackey as evidence against non-summativism but a third case, MANIPULATING MEMBERSHIP, explicitly identified by Lackey as a lacuna in her account:

MANIPULATING MEMBERSHIP: The epistemic states of Phillip Morris & its executives are the same as in IGNORING EVIDENCE. However, rather than simply suspending belief, the executives of Phillip Morris intentionally manipulate the membership of their group over time so tha the entire group is eventually composed of members who do not have a justified belief in the health hazards of smoking. Therefore, Phillip Morris suspends belief on this matter.

In particular, it is clear that something has gone epistemically wrong here, and not just because Phillip Morris' suspension of belief is unjustified until the replacement of executives is finished. Rather, the act of manipulating the group's membership itself violates some epistemic norm.

According to Lackey, however, not only does her account of group justified belief (the GEAA) fail to identify this, but "every account of group justification succumbs" to this counterexample (391). We might phrase this as saying the distributivity of JB is insufficiently precise to account for the relevant epistemic wrong. In contrast, the ZIP-alternative *can* handle this case, and all those like it. The ZIP-alternative tells a simple and intuitive story: what has gone wrong is that the members are preventing the group from figuring out if smoking is dangerous, violating their distributed normative obligation to ZIP. The ZIP-alternative, therefore, not only "gets it right", but "gets it right *for the right reason*", and in so doing, offers a more robust and symmetric treatment of Lackey-style evidence manipulation cases.

In this paper, I have provided an alternate interpretation of Lackey's IGNORING EVIDENCE and defended it against various objections. This interpretation allows for non-summativist accounts of justified group belief to accommodate our intuitions about Phillip Morris. It remains to be seen whether a different case can reestablish the distributivity of justified belief. For now, however, the non-summativist is safe.

## References

- Friedman, J. (2020). The epistemic and the zetetic. *The Philosophical Review*, 129(4), 501–536. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-8540918>
- Lackey, J. (2016). What is justified group belief? *The Philosophical Review*, 125(3), 341–396. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-3516946>