Reasons and Groups

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Sheron Fraser-Burgess's essay "The Social Nature of Epistemically Normative Deliberation" takes us into a highly complex conceptual landscape. Among other things, the essay deals in parameters such as normativity, education, democracy, democratic deliberation, epistemic processes, epistemically sound processes, social identity, group membership, belief conflicts, testimony, trust, and reasons. Naturally some of these comprise ground and some comprise figure. I will pick my way carefully through this landscape and in my response focus primarily on groups and reasons and their possible relations. I shall argue that as complex as this conceptual landscape already is, further nuances are needed and perhaps the map also needs to be redrawn at certain places.

One of Fraser-Burgess's basic claims can be paraphrased as follows: Suppose that two people have the same belief *p*. For one of them, it is a collective belief to which the members of her/his group are jointly committed. This person, then, has better reason to believe *p* than the other, since s/he has access to group testimony concerning the belief, and, furthermore has good reason to trust the group. The group member thus has an epistemic advantage.

A good many factors are involved in this claim; I shall try to tease out a few of them. On the question of whether Thomas Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings's children, we are told that the way group membership gives access to good reasons sheds light upon the parsing of evidence for and against the Jefferson-Hemings relationship. One group believes they had a relationship, the other does not. Both parties, Fraser-Burgess claims, had evidence for trust in the testimony of their informants. Then, she says, "blacks who claim to be descendants of Jefferson can have access to good reason for the belief by virtue of holding the group identity." I shall return to this example.

Let us begin by looking at testimonies. Fraser-Burgess rightly points out how we often believe something on the basis of testimony — that is, on the basis of the assertion of another. Many cultural beliefs are acquired in this manner, often unknowingly by processes of socialization. A cultural group member has good reason to believe that *p* because s/he has good reason to believe group testimony concerning *p*; s/he has ample evidence of the group's trustworthiness. Now it is obvious that a group member has evidence about the group and its trustworthiness that a nonmember does not have access to. The interesting problems lie elsewhere.

Usually one would expect there to be a dialectic of trust and suspicion concerning testimonies, but in this essay we hear only about the trust. Such a dialectic may of course vary from one community or group to another. The concept of a group employed in this essay suggests that groups are highly stable, close-knit, cohesive units whose members are committed to the same beliefs. Trusting each

other's word is both a consequence and a reinforcement of that interdependence. This needs to be tempered with considerations about indoctrination, gullibility, and the danger involved if groups get no input from outside. The group of British Muslims who blew up the London Metro is a perfect example of such a group, one with shared beliefs, commitments, and trust.

So you believe the group's testimony that *p* because you have evidence of the trustworthiness of the belief source. But where does this evidence originate? Does not the group testify to its own trustworthiness? If so, we have a nice circle: the group is trustworthy because it says so itself. However, the essay briefly deals with this objection by invoking the notion of testimony-independent reasons for testimony. It is not clear to me precisely what such testimony-independent reasons could be, but I am not sure that Fraser-Burgess can elude the problem of circularity. She claims that each person's experience of being a group member yields a testimony-independent basis on which to justify trust in group beliefs, but individual experience is profoundly shaped by the group — and would this not be one's own (subjective) testimony? It seems difficult to establish the wanted testimony-independent evidence concerning testimony given the close-knit character of the group and its joint commitments.

Where does this bring us in terms of the Jefferson-Hemings example? I am not entirely sure that the descendants of either could be defined as a tight-knit identity group, but let us assume that they can. Members of each group have evidence for the trustworthiness of their respective group — this is what Fraser-Burgess says that group membership gives. But where does this evidence come from, other than the group itself? It is hardly surprising that if you hold a belief *p* and your group holds the same belief, you will think that the group is right. But does it provide evidence for the group's trustworthiness? It may, for the group.

Let us investigate further how this might play out. What, precisely, does the evidence speak to? Here we first need to make a preliminary distinction (implicitly also made in Fraser-Burgess's essay) between direct and indirect evidence. Direct evidence speaks to the truth of the belief in question, namely whether Jefferson is the father of Hemings's children. But the reasons under discussion are not of this kind; they are, rather, indirect: my reason for accepting *p* involves your testimony that *p* is true (or in this historical example, that Sally Hemings was reliable). But this is tricky ground. Robert Pinto points out that the reasons why we accept *p* may not be reasons for believing *p*.[1] People may have different social and personal agendas in accepting beliefs, including face-saving and economic interests. Moreover, Pinto argues that reasons and evidence are not the same: while Blaise Pascal's famous wager develops reasons for believing there is a god, none of these reasons appeal to any evidence that god exists. Reasons for believing may or may not contain evidence for believing, Pinto says. Interestingly enough, Fraser-Burgess makes a concession to this distinction without embracing it explicitly when she discusses the fact that DNA tests can settle the matter of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship in a way that testimony and trust cannot. DNA tests are direct evidence, clearly not contained in the reasons for belief that groups in question had access to.

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What I am suggesting is that the notion of reasons may need to be further refined. Especially, I think, this holds for the idea of good reasons. We are not told what makes a reason good, as opposed to what makes it bad. Nor are we told who judges if a reason is good. The group has good reason to believe in the trustworthiness of the group. Does the group itself decide if the reason is good? If so, we encounter again the circularity problem touched upon previously, especially since group membership yields such good reasons.

I would like to take the two last points, direct evidence and judgments of good reasons, a bit further. Peter Achinstein, in his discussion of what makes a reason a good one, distinguishes between four types of evidence (or four different ways of using the concept of evidence).[2] The first two of these seem particularly pertinent here. Are the black descendants of Hemings justified in believing that they are also descendants of Jefferson? We could, Achinstein says, answer that question by appealing to their epistemic situation. Justification is thereby relativized to what, say, Madison Hemings believed and knew — including his knowledge of his own mother's reliability — and what he could not know. Since he could not possibly have known about DNA testing, it may be that he was justified in believing that Jefferson was his father. Piecing together somebody's epistemic situation clearly demands great care, but is not impossible.

Achinstein's second type of evidence is subjective evidence. This evidence is relative to a certain person or group, such that *e* may constitute evidence for one group but not for another. And yes, Achinstein says, if this is what we take evidence to be, then a group may well be said to be justified in their belief *p*. This seems to fit the understanding in Fraser-Burgess's essay quite well, where certain good reasons are confined to a specific group. The question is of course why two groups who believe themselves to be right, and to be in possession of good reasons to which they are all committed, should bother to enter into deliberation with each other. The two last conceptions of evidence are closely connected; Achinstein calls them veridical and potential evidence. These, he says, provide truly good reasons to believe *p*, because they speak directly to the truth of *p*, irrespective of group membership.

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1. Robert Pinto, "Reasons," in *Anyone Who Has a View: Theoretical Contributions to the Study of Argumentation*, eds. Frans H. van Eemeren et al. (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 3–16.

2. Peter Achinstein, *The Book of Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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