

The Social Nature of Epistemically Normative Deliberation

Sheron Andrea Fraser-Burgess
Ball State University

INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRACY, DELIBERATION, AND EDUCATION

Most basic to democratic deliberation is the notion that the political decisions pertaining to self-government derive legitimacy from the public deliberation of free and equal citizens.¹ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson offer one conception of the normative constraints that democratic deliberation imposes on public reasoning. Their leading principle is reciprocity, which is constituted by “the capacity to seek fair terms of social cooperation for their own sake.”² As a principled political view, their form of deliberative democracy “asks citizens and officials to justify public policy by giving reasons that can be accepted by those who are bound by it.”³ In Gutmann and Thompson’s view, seeking “mutually justifiable reasons” is best suited to promotion of the democratic ideal of “civic equality.”⁴ Civic equality is “broadly understood to include freedom and opportunity for all individuals” and demands fairness with regard to claims that are both “shared with and pertain to us as members of the community.”⁵

Reciprocity, mutuality, and equality promote a Kantian impartiality that can lead to political decisions in which morality is incumbent in mutual compromise and consensus-driven procedure. In promoting Kantian ideals of respect and individual expressions of reason,⁶ Gutmann and Thompson’s deliberative democracy exemplifies a moral defense of the political theory, which I will designate as “moral deliberative democracy.”

This essay concerns education that Gutmann believes is consistent with moral deliberative democracy, specifically one “whose aim is to teach the skills and virtues of democratic deliberation.”⁷ In such a theory, the virtues of moral deliberative democracy dictate the parameters of educational control and also serve as the governing principles of pedagogy and substance. Schooling conduces the fostering of civic equality because “democratic deliberation, and the open-minded teaching that anticipates it, encourages all citizens to appreciate, understand and assess differences that are matters of mutual concern.”⁸

Although the democratic ideal of fostering equality is a defensible aim of schooling, a democratic theory of education should account for the significance of democratic deliberation for the epistemological aspects of schooling as well.⁹ Educational concepts such as learning and teaching refer in part to a range of epistemic notions that, as Harvey Siegel argues, include knowledge, truth, and justification.¹⁰ I see at least two issues to be resolved for the epistemic normativity of moral deliberative democracy in education. First, there is the question of whether democratic deliberative inquiry is coextensive with an epistemic process. While democratic deliberation involves mutual justification of beliefs through impartial reasons, there is no *prima facie* relation between mutual justification, which is subjective, and epistemic justification, or knowledge.

The second issue is the undetermined nature of the inclusivity implicit in moral democratic deliberation. An educational theory that supports moral deliberative democracy clearly aims to teach not only that the views of every member of the public affected by a decision should be given a hearing at the deliberative table but also that only public reasons count. Arguably, the demand for impartial reasons can disenfranchise those that offer reasons based in their social identity.

Given that the public deliberates about a range of questions that require decisions of both what ought to be and what is, democratic deliberation should be able to settle both kinds of issues on adequate grounds. When applied to education, I interpret this normative constraint as a requirement that moral democratic deliberation foster epistemically sound educational discourse. While a comprehensive account of such a discourse is beyond the scope of this essay, I offer here a heuristic premised upon moral democratic deliberation. This process, I argue, is epistemically sound and has particular salience in a multiculturally diverse school setting where there may be differences in beliefs based upon membership in various sociocultural groups. I will begin by considering a paradigmatic case of beliefs that conflict along the lines of social identity, and then I will address some implications for education as inclusive deliberative inquiry.

A PARADIGMATIC CASE FOR EPISTEMICALLY NORMATIVE DELIBERATION

One recent issue that exposed cultural fault lines in U.S. society was the controversy surrounding Thomas Jefferson's relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. The chief point of contention was whether Jefferson fathered children by Hemings. To the extent that this conflict about Jefferson's and Hemings's relationship has taken shape within, and generally along, cultural and ethnic lines, an evidentiary conundrum emerges and raises a question about identity-group beliefs.

Until 1998, the general consensus in the historical and scholarly literature was that Jefferson did not father any of Hemings's children. In 1998, scientists compared the "Y-chromosomal DNA haplotypes from male-line descendants of Field Jefferson, a paternal uncle of Thomas Jefferson, with those of male-line descendants" of two of Sally Hemings's sons. "The molecular findings... provide evidence" that Thomas Jefferson was the biological father of Eston Hemings.¹¹ However, the DNA evidence did not entirely settle the matter. The findings made the claims of Jefferson's paternity of at least one of Hemings's children more credible, but the DNA analysis also could not rule out Jefferson's brother as the father. Further, Hemings claimed that Jefferson fathered all of her children, but the DNA evidence made it highly unlikely that Jefferson was the father of her oldest son.¹²

A straightforward evaluation of the pre-1998 testimonial evidence pits the cadre of white descendents of Jefferson and the expertise of the white historians who denied the Jefferson-Hemings relationship against the long oral history of the blacks who claim to be descendents of Jefferson and Hemings. The beliefs of the former were widely accepted and published, but the DNA evidence supported the claims of the latter. In one sense this story exemplifies mainstream exclusionary narratives of U.S. history, which can be discourses of power and majoritarianism. The story is,

however, more complex; while many African Americans held that the Hemings children were descendants of Thomas Jefferson, white historians arguably had evidence to support their mainstream view.

In school settings, this incident and its subsequent treatment in textbooks exemplifies cultural conflict that cannot be fully resolved merely by recourse to the reciprocity, recognition, and toleration that moral democratic deliberation implies because the facts are in dispute. Further, postmodernist critiques of the metanarrative and poststructural analysis of power relations foreground the role of power and cultural dominance in skewing the outcome of democratic deliberation.

Since the Jefferson-Hemings disagreement was so socioculturally aligned, I propose that in a school setting, deliberating about this matter involves questioning whether a belief has epistemic merit by virtue of being held by a member of a group identified by some social, cultural, or ethnic marker. In my view, this question considers whether those who claimed prior to 1998 that they were privy to facts concerning the Jefferson and Hemings liaison, by virtue of their membership in a social, cultural, or ethnic group, had evidence of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship.

In considering this historical issue, I argue here that where democratic deliberation is normatively conceived as reasoning together with others to reach shared beliefs that comport with the evidence, group membership can give access to good reasons that would not otherwise be available to an individual that is not a member of the sociocultural group. To acknowledge that group membership potentially gives access to good reasons for group belief, engenders a more equitable starting point for deliberation without compromising epistemic values.

SOCIAL CONCEPTS OF EPISTEMIC DELIBERATION

I begin by defining my argument's operational social concepts. First is the notion of a group. I am presupposing that a sociocultural group can also be described as an "identity group," that is, an association of people who share a specific social marker such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion. Such group members share experiences and ideologies that Gutmann says are "mutually recognizable features around which groups are identified with one another in politically significant ways."¹³

A second concept is "group identity." In social theory and philosophy, a distinction has been made between an identity group and collectivities or action groups, which I label the "group identity." While the former refers to the categorization by which cultural groups are externally aggregated, the latter underscores the sense in which group members view themselves and each other as members of a given group.

In explicating the notion of group identity, I employ the concept of being a "plural subject." According to Margaret Gilbert, to be a plural subject is to be "jointly committed" under "conditions of knowledge." This does not mean that group members must know the term "joint commitment," but rather that they must be aware, directly or indirectly, that a particular action, belief, artifact, or the like is

one that they take part in, hold, or treasure, by virtue of being members of a group.¹⁴ On this account then, while being a member of an identity group is a necessary condition of group identity, plural subjectivity is also needed to have sufficient conditions. When a member of an identity group views her/himself as having the obligation to believe together with those in her/his identity group, in many if not all respects, then that member shares the group identity to the same extent.

The distinction between the identity group and the group identity is in keeping with intuitions about the ways in which a member may be related to a group with which he or she shares a social marker. Socially and politically, individuals are grouped according to overt attributes, such as ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation. However, as plural subjectivity suggests, the individual agent makes the choice to partake in a given group identity. It follows that there are many who may fit into a given social category and yet not consider themselves to be holders of the group identity.

Given that the group identity is a locus of identification with a particular community, the group identity situates the individual within a social framework that profoundly governs her/his experience of the world in a way that merely sharing a socially significant trait does not. Although Linda Martin Alcoff does not explicitly distinguish between the identity group and the group identity, her distinctions are consistent with there being two categories of intragroup relations vis-à-vis identities. She maintains that identities imposed on people from the outside “are more of an ascription than [a] meaningful characterization of self.” The identities that are a meaningful characterization of self are, according to Alcoff,

positioned or located lived experience and historical narratives. Given this view, one might hold that when I am identified, it is my horizon of agency that is identified. Thus identities are not lives as a discrete and stable set of interests, but as a site from which one must engage in the process of meaning-making and thus from which one is open to the world.¹⁵

Alcoff’s view is that the group identity is the platform that launches constitutive aspects of individual identity. Its influence is such that an epistemic implication of group identity is that it is coextensive with a doxastic community of shared values and other kinds of beliefs. Group identities “facilitate or inhibit knowledge by predisposing us to register and interpret information in certain ways.”¹⁶

The third significant concept for my argument is that of a “group belief.” Group beliefs are the collective beliefs that constitute plural subjectivity. Gilbert holds that a collective belief is one where group members “jointly accept” a proposition, meaning that it is “common knowledge” in the group that individual members of the group “have openly expressed a conditional commitment to accept a proposition” together with other members.¹⁷ For cultural, social, and ethnic groups, common knowledge propositions are the definitive beliefs that are out in the open as group beliefs. Examples of these beliefs for cultures are the cultural stories that influence individual actions, beliefs, and attitudes of cultural group members. A wide range of ethical, empirical, and religious beliefs fall into this category. To be a group member in the fullest sense, one needs to bear the social marker and to be “jointly committed,” in Gilbert’s term, to the common knowledge beliefs of the group.

Having delineated the major concepts of my thesis, I now propose ways in which group membership can give you access to good reasons.

TRUST AS A SOURCE OF GOOD REASONS FOR GROUP BELIEF

Being a member of an identity group can place one in a better epistemic position vis-à-vis the beliefs of the group than if one were not a member. Such a view implies that there can be added epistemic value to a group member believing what the group believes as compared to a non-group member so believing. A corollary is that given the nature of group identity, the group member can have good reasons for trusting the group that are not available to the non-group member, and it entails that any belief that constitutes a group identity can have more epistemic value than it would otherwise have if it were not a group belief.¹⁸ The belief conditions for the relationship among the group, the group identity belief, and the group identity holder are the following:

1. If the group (G) has a belief that *p*, then to be jointly committed, the member (GA) of the group has the same belief that *p*.
2. GA also has the belief that G has a belief that *p*. Indeed, s/he does so necessarily, if s/he is to believe that *p* jointly with others.

Given that the group belief is propositional, it seems reasonable to infer that the group belief can function propositionally in the agent's web of belief in much the same way as a non-group belief does. It is embedded in GA's web of belief by virtue of relations of support among beliefs. However, GA's holding of a group belief, that *p*, is distinguished from a non-group identity holder's assertion of the belief in that the causal origin of GA's belief that *p* can be found to be well-based in the trust in the group of the group identity holder.

In the extant literature, well-based or justified trust is contingent on the evidence for trustworthiness.¹⁹ In my view, the epistemic benefit of group identity for group belief occurs because the group identity holder has ample evidence of the trustworthiness of the group with respect to not being deceived, although not always of the trustworthiness with respect to the group being a reliable source for the belief. I develop the meaning and significance of this evidence for trust in the next section.

EPISTEMIC VALUE IN GOOD REASONS FOR TRUST IN ONE'S IDENTITY GROUP

When being a holder of the group identity is the causal origin of the belief, the epistemic value of good reasons for trust in the group comes from the group identity holder believing on the basis of the assertion of another. For instance, consider the example of a young Chinese person, Frances, who because her culture so believes, believes that the interests of the community override the interests of any one member. Another such empirical example is a belief about an indigenous cure that has been passed down from generation to generation. For example, Janet's culture believes that the plant vervine is therapeutic for parasites in children (G believes that *p*), and Janet believes this proposition as well because this is what she has been taught.²⁰ Perhaps her parents said that this is what "we" believe. Within the group belief framework, it can be inferred that Janet believes in such a cure, together with others of her culture.²¹

Holding a belief on the basis of the assertion of another, as Janet and Frances each do, is an instance of believing on the basis of testimony. Causally based beliefs are generally testimonial beliefs. In testimony, as observed by Jonathan Adler, we typically accept the word of the speaker and come to hold the belief they assert.²² In my view, their cultural group membership can give Janet and Frances good reasons not available to non-group identity holders to believe the group testimony because each has ample evidence that the belief source can be trusted not to be deceptive. Since the reason Janet and Frances hold their respective beliefs that *p* is because these are essential beliefs of their particular cultural groups, in the formal terms of modernist epistemology, each person's experience of being a group member gives her a testimony-independent basis on which to justify her trust in the group belief.

In the literature, the notion of testimony-independent reasons for believing testimony is at the heart of reductionist epistemology.²³ The reductionist worry about testimony lies in the evidentiary dissonance between it being a widespread source of belief and the fact that little evidence can seem to warrant the trust that is placed in the source of the testimony. In more detail, the problem of testimony is the discrepancy between two sets of credible claims, as Adler explains it:

(1) (a) We readily accept testimony. A paradigm case is...accepting directions from a stranger. (b) Many of our beliefs originate in testimony, and our knowledge would be severely limited if we subtracted from it that portion that originates in testimony. (c) The speaker's word is the hearer's reason to believe the testimony offered. What justifies the resulting belief is the fact that the speaker asserted it and that the hearer trusts the speaker. But, (2) (d) we typically have little or no grounds attesting to the reliability of our informants, for example, that of the stranger who offers directions. Yet (e), we are vulnerable to our informants' reporting falsely, either because they are unreliable or because they are not truthful.²⁴

Adler reasons that in fact testimony provides "strong empirical support" that we get knowledge from others. The putative reductionist problem with testimony, he continues, neglects this support by focusing on the information-seeker (hearer, audience) who must rely on the word of his informant without the benefit of knowing him. However, the background, which is out of focus, supplies an enormous, if hardly noticed, critical foundation for the information seeker that can serve as reason to believe testimony.²⁵

Believing in the group belief framework on the basis of testimony fulfills all of the criteria (a–c) that make testimony such an attractive source of beliefs and knowledge and addresses reductionist concerns (d–e) by involving few of the disadvantages of testimony in two ways.²⁶ First, Frances's and Janet's holding the group belief because the group believes it would have strong empirical support because they each could appeal to evidence to support their trust. By its very nature, the communality of group belief provides this kind of support. Janet, for instance, would have grounds that attest to the trustworthiness of the group, primarily because Janet's group is not foreign to her. The group is constituted by those who believe as she does, not only about the relevant matter but also in relation to their general worldview. The group belief would no more knowingly be a false report than each individual would intentionally believe falsely.

Second, that group belief can be warranted by empirical reasons for trust is consistent with the most rigorous evidentiary standards, which support what Adler calls a “*positive-bias* (or *default*) position: that one ought simply to accept a speaker’s testimony unless one has special reason against doing so.”²⁷ Frances’s belief about the priority of community interest over self-interest and Janet’s beliefs about vervine fit firmly into the positive-bias position. It would be reasonable for them to accept the group belief unless there were countervailing reasons to the contrary. An even more salient example of background beliefs as the basis of *p* and positive-bias at work would be if Janet believed *p* because the local medicine man advocated the use of the plant for this purpose because he would have only earned the status of expert in caring for the body if his remedies had achieved an acceptable level of success.

I have been arguing that group membership can give access to reasons that would not otherwise be available if one did not hold the group identity. I premise this claim on the intragroup trust that is established among holders of a group identity based in evidence that the group is trustworthy.

CONCLUSION: REAPING THE DELIBERATIVE BENEFITS

Returning now to the Jefferson-Hemings example, the way in which group membership can give access to good reasons sheds light on the parsing of evidence for and against the Jefferson-Hemings relationship. In this narrative there are contrasting views held by two different groups immediately after Jefferson and Hemings’s deaths, when neither person could confirm or deny the story.²⁸ The former slave community of Monticello and their descendents believed that Jefferson fathered all of Hemings’s children; central to this group belief was Hemings’s son’s assertion that Jefferson was his father based on his mother’s testimony. Jefferson’s defenders — who generally were white and included descendents from his first wife as well as other family members, friends, and admirers — did not believe Jefferson fathered any of Hemings’s children. Each group is jointly committed around defining beliefs, including beliefs concerning the parentage of Hemings’s children.

The example illustrates my thesis because both of the parties had evidence for the trustworthiness of their informants. Madison Hemings learned from his mother that Jefferson was his father and relied on her account. Ellen Randolph Coolidge, Jefferson’s granddaughter who was born in 1796, believed that such a relationship was inconsistent with the character of the man that she knew. Further, Jefferson never acknowledged such a relationship while he was alive. Thus, Coolidge believed herself to be in possession of Jefferson’s *de facto* denial. The causal story in the case of this example is supported by the reliability of testimony. The source of the belief, in each case, was a trusted source.

If my thesis is correct, then blacks who claim to be descendents of Jefferson can have access to good reasons for the belief by virtue of holding the group identity. In the case of the Jefferson-Hemings debate, it may also be argued that the group has evidence of the trustworthiness of their group as being in possession of reliable evidence for the belief itself. They could each appeal to evidence to support trust in

the plethora of background beliefs that also are available by virtue of being members of the cultural community. They have been able to establish the reliability of cultural informants and have observed that most things that they have been told have helped them to live a safe and healthy life. Through the more standard sources of knowledge (perception, memory, reasoning), as well as testimony, they come to have credible knowledge of the reliability of the group belief claims.²⁹

Recognizing that group membership can give access to good reasons expedites the aims of moral deliberation by acknowledging a legitimate diversity of beliefs about important matters. This acknowledgement is about there being a firm evidentiary proclivity within cultures, even if the evidence consists primarily of trust in a group belief. The inclination for trust may be a springboard for undertaking a more rigorous form of inquiry to determine the view that most comports with all of the evidence available. Discovering the truth of the matter would require careful consideration of the evidence for each view on its merits.

In closing, I have argued that group membership can give access to good reasons. Further, I have suggested that this epistemic benefit of group membership provides a foundation for epistemically normative deliberation among groups that are fundamentally in conflict about particular cultural beliefs. By conceding the access to good reasons provided through participating in shared cultural beliefs, the respective group members have a basis for resolution that comports with the evidence provided.

1. James Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity," *Episteme* 3, no. 3 (2006), 177.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 52.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Amy Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26 and 57.

6. Guido Pincione and Fernando Teson, *Rational Choice and Democratic Deliberation: A Theory of Discourse Failure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 184.

7. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), xiv.

8. Amy Gutmann, "Unity and Diversity in Education," *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*, ed. James Banks (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 81.

9. Although Gutmann and Thompson do not defend their form of deliberative democracy on epistemic grounds, other works vigorously and cogently undertake this task. See James Bohman's body of work and, most recently, David Erstlund's *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

10. Harvey Siegel, "Knowledge, Truth and Education," in *Education, Knowledge and Truth: Beyond the Postmodern Impasse*, ed. David Carr (London: Routledge, 1998).

11. Eugene A. Foster, et al., "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," *Nature* (November 5, 1998): 27–8.

12. Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

13. Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, 9.

14. Margaret Gilbert, "Remarks on Collective Belief," in *Social Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Schmitt (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 245.
15. Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42–3.
16. Satya Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 34, cited in Alcoff, *Visible Identities*.
17. Margaret Gilbert, *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality and Obligation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1986), 204–5. The conditionality of the commitment stems from the fact that the group member is obliged to hold the belief as long as it remains a group belief.
18. Later in this essay, I concede some limits on the beliefs for which group membership may provide good reasons because my main argument for group membership giving access to good reasons rests on evidence for the trustworthiness of one's own group members vis-à-vis a given belief. So, group membership does not provide added epistemic benefit in relation to beliefs for which the group is not a reliable source.
19. Mark Owen Webb, "Trudy Govier: Dilemmas of Trust," *Dialogue* 40, no. 2 (2001), 2 and 256.
20. June George, "Culture and Science Education: A Look from the Developing World," *ActionBioscience.org* (May 2001), <http://www.actionbioscience.org/education/george.html>.
21. This scenario suggests the need for a distinction between essential and incidental cultural beliefs. Arguably, a group member may defer on incidental beliefs and still be considered jointly committed but may not do so with essential beliefs. The effectiveness of this example presupposes that the empirical claims under discussion are essential to the cultural canon.
22. Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 132.
23. Reductionist justification employs a distinction between basic, well-founded beliefs and derived ones. In a reductionist epistemology, the reliability of testimony has evidentiary support.
24. Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics*, 135.
25. *Ibid.*, 136.
26. I do not take sides in the debate between the reductionists and the nonreductionists with respect to testimony; I am not claiming that the notion of group beliefs favors one position over the other.
27. Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics*, 142.
28. According to Gordon-Reed, Hemings died nine years after Jefferson's death in 1835.
29. In *Belief's Own Ethics*, Adler refers to four sources of background beliefs: reliable testimony, "powerful institutional and social constraints to speak truthfully and reliably — most prominently, reputation," credible knowledge of the competence of cultural reports, and "background knowledge that grounds judgments of prior plausibility" (151).

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