

Doxastic Freedom in John Dewey's School

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While the Laboratory School was non-ideal in Dewey's view, it approximated a utopian educational setting insofar as it provided doxastic freedom for all concerned.¹ Doxastic freedom obtains when social conditions of belief are non-coercive. Absent cognitive constraints imposed by other individuals, singly or as members of a group, doxastic freedom is a condition of belief formation. Conditions of doxastic unfreedom range from social coercion at the most severe and explicit end of a continuum to social desirability at the most comfortable, implicit end. Given that belief in doxastic freedom as an inherent property of individuals has currency among philosophers, an argument for a social conception of doxastic freedom is required to substantiate its importance to the daily operation of the Dewey School. Successful argument for a social conception of doxastic freedom shows that it was the institutional structure of the Dewey School that made possible the pedagogy of inquiry practiced there. This point is important enough to merit demonstration that doxastic freedom describes social conditions, not psychological properties.

GROUP BELIEFS VERSUS BELIEFS OF INDIVIDUALS IN GROUPS

In "Remarks on Collective Belief," philosopher Margaret Gilbert objects to summativist accounts of group belief on two grounds. The first, called by her "the problem of the offended rebuke," shows that summativism cannot give an account of the conditions under which denial of a belief by one member of a group can give rise to shocked responses by other members.² If Gilbert is right, summativism is insufficient as an account of all the features of group belief. The second objection, unnamed by Gilbert but accommodating of "the problem of personal disclaimers" suggests that summativism is "completely on the wrong track. It is not even a necessary condition of our believing that p that each or most of us believe that p personally" (*RCB*, 251). If Gilbert is right again, the ability of all group members to believe p qua members of the group and at the same time believe not-p "personally" presents one case of group belief summativism cannot account for at all.

Oddly, Gilbert spends more time dealing with the former, weaker objection to summativism. The oddity in her approach is not just logical, but substantive, too. Gilbert's well-developed solution to the problem of offended rebuke surreptitiously employs summativism. At the same time, her underdeveloped treatment of the problem of personal disclaimers leaves unexplained the precise nature of summativism's failure. It is possible, however, to correct this situation. First, I will show how Gilbert circles back to summativism in her solution to the problem of offended rebuke. Second, I will argue the case against summativism presented by the problem of personal disclaimers.

THE PROBLEM OF OFFENDED REBUKE

An offended rebuke is a response of shocked surprise to denial of a belief thought to be held in common by the denier and at least one other person. To count

as offended rebuke, shocked surprise must exhibit two features: the rebuker must feel justified in uttering the rebuke; and the rebuked must understand the basis of the rebuke (*RCB*, 240). Gilbert contends that collective belief (non-summativist) views of group belief explain offended rebuke better than unanimity (majoritarian, summativist) views (*RCB*, 235).

Summativist accounts of group belief fail to explain the second feature of offended rebuke, how the rebuked can understand the basis of the rebuke. Summativists cannot explain this because summativism, the view that a group holds a belief just to the extent that individual members of that group (qua members of it) sincerely and unambiguously assent to that belief, assumes doxastic freedom of group members.³ To the degree that it does, there is no basis for a member of a group to understand offended rebuke. Dissenters merely exercise the doxastic freedom they were presumed to have all along.

Gilbert's account attempts to avoid this problem by introducing the notion of a plural subject. On her view, for persons A and B and psychological attribute X, A and B form a plural subject of X-ing if and only if A and B are jointly committed to X-ing as a body (*RCB*, 244) where "joint commitment is a function of the participants' conception of their situation. Roughly speaking, people become jointly committed by mutually expressing their willingness to be jointly committed, in conditions of common knowledge" (*RCB*, 245). These commitments, however, are individual in character and we cannot infer from A-and-B's plural subjecthood that A personally X's and B personally X's. We can only infer, says Gilbert, that both A and B "have the concept of X-ing" (*RCB*, 245).

Their willingness jointly to commit creates an obligation of one person to the other(s) and that obligation, based as it is on mutual willingness, holds force until mutually abandoned (*RCB*, 247). The joint obligation thus created explains the ability of a member of a group to understand the basis of offended rebuke when breaking epistemic faith with the other(s) to whom he is jointly committed. This understanding grows weaker or stronger and associated obligations grow correlatively weaker or stronger as precision of understanding between jointly committing parties decreases or increases, respectively (*RCB*, 249).

This is how Gilbert explains the ability to understand offended rebuke. That ability results from joint commitment by members of a group to believe p together. She allows that joint commitment to belief depends on the individual willingness of parties jointly committing. These willingnesses are the sole condition mentioned in Gilbert's if and only if analysis of group belief. This is important because the willingness condition reintroduces individual choice to believe, the hallmark of summativism, into the account of group belief. Gilbert accomplishes this because of a unique feature of the issues she overlooks.

In fact, two beliefs must be accounted for in analysis of group belief and Gilbert addresses only one of them. First, there is the belief that p. Gilbert accounts for this by assessing joint commitment in terms of the willingnesses of at least two persons to believe p. But this account prevents Gilbert from giving non-summativist treatment of the second belief attached to group belief, the belief that the belief that

p is believed collectively. Willingness to believe cannot ground this belief because willingness involves personal choice. Insofar as her analysis holds belief to be group belief just in case individuals jointly commit to believe p, Gilbert's analysis adopts summativism and fails to advance non-summativist accounts of group belief. Reexamination of Gilbert's second charge against summativism avoids this embarrassment.

THE PROBLEM OF PERSONAL DISCLAIMERS

While the problem of offended rebuke receives full, albeit infelicitous treatment from Gilbert, another, more serious problem receives merest mention. This underdeveloped problem for summativism Gilbert finds in

ways of talking that appear to allow people to affirm that not-p although they are members of a plural subject of believing that p in a situation where blunt denial of p is out of order. One may say, for instance, "Look I personally do not believe that p..." Or, "Speaking personally," one seems to differentiate oneself as an individual from-what? Oneself as a member of the relevant plural subject, perhaps. The fact that we have this way of speaking suggests that, in general, participating in believing that p as a body does not require personally believing that p (*RCB*, 251, Gilbert's emphasis).

The presence in the language of these manners of expression indicates, says Gilbert, that summativism is not so much wrong as wrongheaded. The problem of personal disclaimer presents summativists with the seriously damaging possibility of cases of group belief in which no single member of the group holds the belief but the group as a whole does.

This is an issue separate from the problem of offended rebuke. The difference is plain in light of the inability of joint commitment analysis to allow such ways of talking. Insofar as persons willingly and jointly commit to believe p as a body they individually commit to believe p. To say that personally you believe not-p in this situation is simply to deny your end of the joint commitment and invoke justified, understandable offended rebuke. Thus, cases of joint-commitment-collective-belief do not allow personal disclaimers of the kind Gilbert describes (*RCB*, 249-50).

Neither, it would seem, do summativist accounts. Summativist views do not provide a contrast between personal belief and group belief appropriate to explanation of the propriety of personal disclaimers. This linguistic phenomenon can always be cashed out by the sincere and, therefore, unobjectionable summativist statement: "p is not the way I voted." But this "blunt denial" is not what Gilbert has in mind. Personal disclaimer of group belief is alleged by Gilbert to take place only when blunt denial is not in order. The problem for summativism is that blunt denial by a member of the group is always possible. No dissenting, eligible voter ever has to believe p even in cases of N-1 acceptance of p by fellow group members. Insofar as the summativist sums freely formed individual beliefs to determine group beliefs, the summativist surrenders appropriate contrast of group belief to individual belief. This surrender also deprives the summativist of a way to explain free standing phenomena of acceptable language use. This may be what Gilbert means when she says the problem of personal disclaimers suggests summativism is on the wrong track: If personal disclaimers of group beliefs are allowable linguistic devices, then all groups cannot fit the summativist account of group belief.

Now the kind of groups that do fit summativist accounts are those the members of which form their beliefs voluntarily. This prevents summativist access to personal disclaimers in discussion of group belief and gives some indication that Gilbert may wish to look to groups the members of which form beliefs involuntarily to fill out her account. However, an objection arises immediately if Gilbert goes this way. It seems highly implausible to ascribe beliefs to a group that only a few or even none of its members hold.⁴ This objection can be defused, though, if it is possible to give an account of what it means for a group member to hold a belief involuntarily.

INVOLUNTARILY HELD BELIEFS

To hold a belief involuntarily is to hold a belief outside conditions of doxastic freedom. This may seem an unusual, even strange position because to hold a belief requires sincere and unambiguous assent to it, requires, that is, doxastic freedom.⁵ To avoid this objection explication of “doxastic freedom” must be given that allows beliefs to be held sans doxastic freedom and finds room for legitimate use of personal disclaimer.

Summativists treat doxastic freedom as a property of knowers, as something cognizers have qua cognizers. This treatment rests on a dogma: Holding a belief without doxastic freedom is impossible. This dogma, however, reclassifies an ideal condition of cognition into a prerequisite for belief and rules by holding involuntary belief out of account. This philosophical legislation blocks reference to group belief in any but a summativist way but simultaneously blocks summativist attempts to solve the problem of personal disclaimer.

A different approach to doxastic freedom takes doxastic freedom as, to use Aristotle’s distinction, “present in” but not “said of” individual cognizers.⁶ Doxastic freedom is a property of the context in which individuals form beliefs, not a property of individuals. Individuals instantiate doxastic freedom (or do not, as the case may be). They do not have doxastic freedom as a part of their personal, inalienable cognitive constitution. Conversely, individuals are “said of” but not “present in” doxastic freedom. Individuals are part of the conditions of cognition but doxastic freedom is not required for instantiation of an individual cognizer.

On this conception of doxastic freedom, doxastic freedom becomes an environmental condition of cognizing. Where the group is the, or a major arbiter, of doxastic freedom, doxastic freedom becomes a social condition of belief. This means that beliefs held voluntarily are not different in kind from beliefs held involuntarily. Beliefs held voluntarily are beliefs held under environmental conditions of doxastic freedom. Beliefs held involuntarily are beliefs held under environmental conditions that restrict doxastic freedom to a greater or lesser degree. Social conditions of doxastic unfreedom range along a continuum the extremes of which are social coercion and social desirability. An interesting feature of this is that the more conditions of doxastic unfreedom tend toward social desirability, the less likely individuals will have available to them recognition that conditions under which they believe are constrictive. In other words, the sincerity condition of belief does not have to be surrendered when doxastic freedom is “socialized.”⁷

In cases of clear coercion, summativist tendency is to deny sincerity of belief to coerced cognizers. When King Chilperic issued an edict to the Jews of Paris in 581 A.D. that all must be baptized into the Christian faith and attached a rider to the proclamation that said, "If any man scorns our edict, let him be punished by having his eyes put out," Parisian Jews professed faith in Christ.⁸ Now, summativists would claim that the Jews did not believe what they professed. Indeed, it would have been a cruel joke to canvass members of the Jewish community about the beliefs they really held regarding Christianity. But the cruelty and the humor do not reside in the inherent doxastic freedom of the Jews. Instead, they reside in the fact that the canvassing would have occurred in the context of the doxastic unfreedom of Chilperic's edict or outside it. If the summativist vote is taken outside the context, the Jews reject belief in Christianity. If the summativist vote is taken in the context of Chilperic's edict, all living Jews with functioning eyes in their heads will most certainly be found to believe in Christianity.

The point is that summativism necessarily assumes what may not be the case. It assumes that what people really believe they believe independently of environmental conditions; when in fact the beliefs people profess may be environmentally dependent. That is why sometimes there is no need to take a poll to find out what members of a group believe. A poll is necessary only under conditions of doxastic freedom. Under conditions of doxastic unfreedom the outcome of the vote is already decided.

This raises the question of the relation of beliefs held involuntarily to the traditional analysis of knowledge. Are coerced beliefs epistemically otiose?⁹ The answer to this question is that they are, provided personal disclaimer is possible in regard to them. If personal disclaimer is not possible in regard to them, the belief is possible only under conditions of coercion and there is no way to drive a wedge between conditions of doxastic freedom and doxastic unfreedom. Group conditions function in this manner. They seem occasionally to impose blinders on group members making them unable or unlikely to consider that their beliefs could be unjustified or false.¹⁰ Thus, there seems to be reason to hold that even the fact of social desirability subverts summativism at the level of social epistemology.

DOXASTIC FREEDOM AS SOCIAL CONDITION

Socializing doxastic freedom explains how members of a group have access to personal disclaimers. When saying, "Personally, I believe..." one is not to be taken literally as referring to some property of himself as a cognizer. "Personally" in this context does not mean "in and of my own person." Instead, "Personally" marks a counterfactual reference to conditions of doxastic freedom. The reference is counterfactual because any cognizer making personal disclaimer must be aware of two things: that his beliefs are formed under conditions of doxastic unfreedom and that his beliefs would be different if formed under conditions of doxastic freedom. These awarenesses, if available at all, are mutually available. As the degree rises to which social conditions are felt to control one's beliefs, ability to make reference counterfactually to conditions of doxastic freedom (and the likelihood of making such reference) also rises.

This non-summativist solution to the problem of personal disclaimer also allows non-summativist resolution of the problem of offended rebuke. When a member of a group is greeted by shocked surprise at denial of a group belief he is being reminded, gently or gruffly, of the conditions, doxastically unfree, under which others are taking her currently to be cognizing. To use terminology formed in criticism of Gilbert's solution to the problem of offended rebuke, the belief that the belief that *p* is held collectively is a function of the social conditions in which the belief that *p* is held. To deny the belief is to deny that those social conditions obtain or have effect. The offended rebuke is an attempt to remind a dissenter of the social conditions that obtain and to reinstate their effect upon the dissenter.

These resolutions of the problem of offended rebuke and the problem of personal disclaimer rely on a shift in the meaning of doxastic freedom. That shift is significant for social epistemology no doubt in several ways but in one way preeminently. Taking doxastic freedom out of the individual cognizer and putting it in the environment of cognizing permits the social epistemologist to say that even the most isolated cognizer is in some conditions of cognizing or other. Among those conditions are social conditions. Thus, it becomes possible for the social epistemologist to describe the doxastic freedom of an isolated individual cognizer as doxastic freedom under the social conditions of isolation, doxastic freedom enjoyed in the absence of any cognitive constraints of other cognizers and socially coercive features of groups. This allows the social epistemologist to say that all knowing occurs in a social context. This is important because if it is not allowed that all knowing is in a social context, it is possible to object to non-summativists that they do not give an account of group beliefs. Instead, they only explain the differences between beliefs held by individual cognizers in a social context and those beliefs held by individual cognizers apart from a social context.¹¹

However, it is just this distinction that the social understanding of doxastic freedom denies. On this version of doxastic freedom, the social epistemologist says two things when dealing with the idea of group beliefs. The first is that all knowing is in a social context. The second is that some social contexts prevent belief attribution to individual cognizers while other social contexts allow it.

WHY DEWEY RECOMMENDS DOXASTIC FREEDOM

Dewey's school operated as close as possible to conditions of doxastic freedom. Administration of the school depended heavily on association and exchange among teachers rather than exercise of bureaucratic authority by school principals. What supervision was given of teachers was given in the spirit of cooperation with the work of teachers as instructors of students.¹²

The work of the teachers as instructors consisted primarily in planning and implementing curricula that provided students with practice in various methods of inquiry.¹³ Teachers were expected to be able to choose for this purpose activities that were adapted to the level of inquiry in which students were ready to engage, promising as preparation for the social responsibilities of adulthood, and optimizing of opportunity to exercise acute observation and consecutive inference.¹⁴

Teachers were experts both in their areas of academic expertise and in techniques of presentation to students of materials drawn from those areas. Even the

paperwork teachers completed while preparing their lessons and assessing the effects of their lessons on their students promoted the process of inquiry into teaching. Teachers described what they hoped to accomplish on forms with two headings: "From the teacher's standpoint" and "From the students' standpoint."¹⁵ The essential idea of these forms was to apply educational theory to school practice; and the qualities of teachers Dewey believed to be essential to achievement of successful outcomes in this endeavor were good habits of observation, insight, and reflection.¹⁶

Students were divided into small groups by age and by interest in an effort to maximize their identity with the kinds and levels of inquiry available at the school. Younger students tended to engage in household occupations such as playing active games and taking care of plants and animals. As students matured they undertook more cosmopolitan subjects. Engaged in most cases in some kind of cultural-historic recapitulation, students began inquiry at the local level and progressively advanced to studies with international scope. Finally, the oldest students developed experimental activities of special interest by which they studied principles of academic areas ranging from literature to science to vocations.¹⁷

Parents, too, were caught up in the inquiries that characterized education at Dewey's school. Parents and teachers met monthly at Parents' Association meetings to discuss teachers' plans for students, the expected results of those plans, and the results actually achieved. Dewey also arranged classes at the University of Chicago to engage interested parents in discussion of the principles on which operations at the school ran. The idea behind the classes was to put parents in a position to judge the quality of the education their children were receiving. The overall outcome was a set of parents able to understand what the school wanted for their children and how they, the parents, might best aid in achieving educationally desirable ends.¹⁸

Even discipline in the Lab School tended towards enforcement of rules of social desirability based in concern for members of the school community rather than rules of social coercion grounded in concern for the dictates of the school considered as an authoritative and unimpeachable institution. For example, a group of twelve year old boys lost interest in and rejected teacher plans for a historical study of geology. When they became disruptive of the efforts of their classmates to continue with the lesson, the boys, Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards report in their study of the school that they

were finally taken out of the class and allowed to follow their own diverse and individual lines until the general trends of their interests could be determined. This interest proved to be along scientific lines closely related to things the boys were making in the shop....As some of the boys had had the science of Group VIII-a in the previous year and others the science of Group VIII-b, it was necessary to begin their work together with a simple, general topic and gradually lead back to their individual choices.¹⁹

This episode brings out the interest of inquiry in doxastic freedom. Of Ella Flagg Young's influence on this, Dewey said,

it was from her that I learned that freedom and respect for freedom meant regard for the inquiring and reflective process of individuals, and that what ordinarily passes for freedom — freedom from external restraint, spontaneity in expression, etc., are of significance only in connection with thinking operations.²⁰

So, freedom of inquiry is the only real freedom. The reason is clear: Freedom is of value to inquiry because freedom promises better quality of experience or, alternatively, more (in both a quantitative and a qualitative sense) educative experiences. Dewey states his view on this by asking rhetorically this question:

Is it not the reason for our preference [for democratic social arrangements over non- or anti-democratic ones] that we believe that mutual consultation and convictions reached through persuasion, make possible a better quality of experience than can otherwise be provided on any wide scale?²¹

Inquiry's interest in conditions of doxastic freedom requires Dewey to recommend a liberal school politics as close as possible to participatory democracy.²² Only under these conditions could the expressions of belief about the school made in public by individuals associated with the school be trusted to coincide with their expressions of belief about the school made in private.

1. John Dewey, "Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 136-40.

2. Margaret Gilbert, "Remarks on Collective Belief," in *Socializing Epistemology*, ed. Frederick Schmitt (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Pub., Inc. 1994), 240. This essay will be cited as *RCB* for all subsequent references.

3. J. Angelo Corlett, *Analyzing Social Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 64.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Aristotle, *Categories and Propositions*, trans. H. Apostle (Grinell, IA: The Peripatetic Press, Inc., 1980), 1a20-69; 2a12-3b5.

7. For example, some radical feminists attack the sincere beliefs of many women that mothering and domesticity are the only proper female roles as the residue of centuries of patriarchal conditioning. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Marilyn Frye, "A Response to Lesbian Ethics" in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

8. Details of this strange story of Priscus, head of the Parisian Jews, and Chilperic, king of the Franks, are in Augustin Thierry, *Tales of the Early Franks*, trans. Michael Jenkins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977). It is instructive to note how the situation arose. Chilperic, evidently as a joke but at least on a whim, invited a passing Catholic bishop to bless his friend, Priscus. Horrified at publicly putting another deity above his own, Priscus recoiled from the bishop's outstretched hand. Chilperic, infuriated at this disobedience, insisted on the blessing. Priscus' continued refusal led, ultimately, to promulgation of the edict. This is instructive in that Chilperic, himself, need have had no belief in the superiority of Christ or Christianity to put his Jewish subjects through such extreme ordeal. Yet, if asked why he did it, it is open to Chilperic sincerely to respond that he did it out of immense Christian faith and concern for the souls of his non-Christian subjects.

9. Corlett, *Analyzing Social Knowledge*, 67.

10. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

11. Corlett, *Analyzing Social Knowledge*, 19-20.

12. Laurel Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 96, 101.

13. Dewey, "The University Elementary School: History and Character," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 1 (1899-1901), ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 333.

14. Dewey, *How We Think* in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 6 (1930-1931), 229.

15. Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School*, 47, 101, and 167.
16. Dewey, "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 3 (1903-1906), 249-72.
17. This general description of educational activities at the Lab School summarizes a number of pages from Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards, *The Dewey School* (1936; reprint, New York: Atherton Press, 1966).
18. Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School*, 115-18.
19. Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 214.
20. Quoted in Tanner, *Dewey's Laboratory School*, 111.
21. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 13 (1938-1939), 18.
22. "To be liberal is all one with being liberating, with effecting a release of human powers." John Dewey, "Challenge to Liberal Thought," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 15 (1944), 265.

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