

Doxastic Freedom and Varieties of Group Belief

David Carr

University of Edinburgh

Generally, Greg Seals's interesting and thought-provoking essay attempts to bring certain considerations about group belief to the aid of an enhanced appreciation of John Dewey's educational views. In this light, one might expect to find problems with his essay in relation to either or all of the following: (i) his analysis of group belief; (ii) his account of Dewey's educational method; (iii) his understanding of the relationship between the two. I have difficulties on all these scores. That said, as space for response is limited (and I am not yet in a position to give very precise expression to all of my concerns about Seals's account), I shall here focus mainly on his analysis of group belief and upon some general educational considerations about freedom of belief.

Much of Seals's essay is devoted to a critical analysis of Margaret Gilbert's critique of "summativist" analyses of group belief: although I think that Seals is right to be critical, I suspect that his treatment is not nearly critical enough. To begin my critique let us ask afresh, then, how we should go about determining the meaning of a statement such as this one:

"All Communist Chinese believe the thoughts of Chairman Mao."

On the face of it, we might first appeal to the logic of quantification. On a purely extensional reading of the predicate (disregarding, that is, familiar non-extensional complexities of some belief contexts) the statement seems construable as an unrestricted generalization of the form,

$$(\forall x) Fx \rightarrow Gx$$

Moreover, on a statistical interpretation, such conditionals are also liable to disconfirmation (as we know from familiar discussions of induction) by a single counter-instance of the form,

$$(\exists x) Fx \ \& \ \sim Gx$$

If this is a black swan, then not all swans are white; if Suzie Wong is a Chinese Communist who disagrees with Chairman Mao (she is a rare sort of Confucian Communist), then not all Communist Chinese are Maoists. Arguably, some such statistical analysis lies behind the summativist account of group belief criticized by both Gilbert and Seals. Despite this, it does not seem unnatural to give a summativist reading to group belief statements occurring as conclusions of social scientific surveys in contexts of *scholarly research* — where, after all, the claim that all X believe p appears to be true if and only if each X believes p and false if any X does not so believe.

As Gilbert and Seals both rightly recognise, however, it seems inappropriate to construe all group belief statements in this way. If, for example, the statement about what all Communist Chinese believe turned up in a *travel brochure* rather than a research journal, it would seem a bit perverse to cite Suzie Wong as counter-example to what is more probably intended as a *typification* of the cultural or political trends of the Chinese Republic: indeed, we are here probably safer in taking it to mean “most Communist Chinese are Maoists.” Of course, on a perfectly proper statistical construal of “most,” this statement could be *false*. That is, if it turned out that less than 50% of Communist Chinese are Maoists, then there might be a case for revising the brochure. But it could equally be that a statistical analysis is here altogether out of place and that “(all) Chinese Communists are Maoists” is concerned more to identify a general cultural climate than a trend. And, of course, Seals’s *personal disclaimers* are quite consistent with such a construal. A Catalonian host might inform his foreign guest that while Spaniards are generally Catholics, few of us nowadays are actual believers; indeed, this claim might even be considered meaningful in the face of a mere surviving handful of actual Spanish Catholic believers.

But suppose that the statement about Communist Chinese turned up in a *political pamphlet* from party HQ. Is it now likely, in view of the Susie Wong counterexample, that the local party boss would admit to error and seek to revise the pamphlet? Since the statement is not a statistical generalization but an expression of party policy — not a description but a *prescription* to the effect that all Communist Chinese *should* believe the thoughts of Mao — this is rather unlikely. Indeed, latter day pioneers of imperative or practical logic have sometimes characterized the difference between theoretical and practical reasoning in terms of the first’s concern to fit the words to the world as opposed to the second’s concern to fit the world to the words.¹ If a theoretical statement fails to describe how things are, then we seek to revise the statement; but if events fail to conform to our prescriptions, we seek to refashion the world. Moreover, it is in the realms of policy, imperative and prescriptive that we should most expect to encounter the phenomenon of *offended rebuke*: “What, you call yourself a Chinese Communist and you do not believe the thoughts of Chairman Mao? Well you had better believe them — *or else*.”

But it would clearly be a mistake to construe these different analyses as *rival* accounts of the logical form of group belief statements; rather, on the contrary, they are mutually *consistent* accounts of the rather different things that “all X believe p” might mean in different contexts of discourse. From this viewpoint, the fact that personal disclaimer or offended rebuke are appropriate responses to expressions of group belief in some contexts does not mean that it is *never* appropriate to *construe* “all X believe p” statistically or summatively. But *it* would seem to be some such “one size fits all” view of the logic of group belief statement which drives Gilbert to her quite bizarre metaphysical fiction of the plural subject, and Seals to his own potentially problematic social interpretation of doxastic freedom.²

Unfortunately, present space precludes detailed exploration of Seals’s social construal of doxastic freedom — although, since I find much of this puzzling, I would anyway be mostly inclined to ask for clarification. Much here seems to hang

on Seals's acceptance of the social epistemologist's claim that "all knowing is in a social context." But this statement also seems in need of considerable disambiguation, and I am unsure which of the more and less plausible things it could mean would have Seals's approval. Is this, for example, the contemporary philosophical commonplace that human knowledge is barely conceivable apart from those forms of spoken or written communication to which some sort of social cooperation or association seems evidently presupposed? Or have we here a stronger claim to the effect that all knowledge is socially constructed in some more radical idealist or non-realist sense?

Of course, one could hardly take exception to the claim that social considerations are *relevant* to doxastic freedom. Indeed, if freedom of belief is simply freedom to believe what one wants, it could hardly be clearer that such freedom is easier in some social conditions than others. For example, it would seem easier to believe what one pleases in the liberal-democratic climate of the Deweyan school than in the repressive worlds of Susie Wong or King Chilperic. However, the difficulty now is that if what Seals means by regarding doxastic freedom as a social *rather than* an individual property is just that such freedom is liberty to believe what one pleases, entirely free from social coercion, it is not clear to me why we should regard it as of any intrinsic value — still less as *educationally* valuable.

One might put the point roughly by saying that whether or not belief is of value seems to depend more on *what* people believe rather than *how* they believe. From this perspective, indeed, it is worth noting that in socially non-coercive (liberal) contexts people often end up believing the most bizarre fantasies of astrology, yetis and aliens, and that the orthodoxies of many socially coercive contexts have been precisely designed (however things turned out) to get people to believe what was meaningful and right rather than false and senseless. At all events, although freedom from social coercion is probably at least *necessary* for believing what one wants, it seems neither necessary *nor* sufficient for believing what is sensible or true. From an educational viewpoint, this suggests that freedom from *error* is at least as doxastically significant as freedom from coercion. But the time-honoured way in which we have educationally gone about promoting freedom from error is precisely via the cultivation of certain *individual* qualities of intellect and character — through, for example, the teaching of critical reason and respect for evidence. If so, then the stark choice which Seals presents to us between a social and an individual conception of doxastic freedom may well be more apparent than real.

1. See, for example, Peter T. Geach, *Reason and Argument* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), chap. 19.

2. Margaret Gilbert, "Remarks on Collective Belief," in *Socializing Epistemology*, ed. Frederick Schmitt (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994), 244 ff.