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Understanding the Social:
New Perspectives from Epistemology

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THE MENTALIZING FOLK

Alvin I. Goldman

Abstract

Three major questions should be answered by any theory of “folk psychology”, or mentalizing. The first question concerns the contents of mental concepts; the second concerns the processes of mental-state attribution (both first- and third-person attribution); and the third concerns the development or acquisition of mentalizing skills. Some major problems are presented for different variants of the “theory-theory” approach, namely, philosophical functionalism, the child-scientist approach, and the modularist approach. The approach favored here is an “introspection-simulation” approach: introspection as an account of first-person mental-state attribution, and simulation as an account of third-person mental-state attribution. The simulationist part of the story is clarified and defended in some detail, including a discussion of the relation between knowledge and simulation. Special attention is given to empirical findings that support the notion that pretend states could really be “facsimiles” of their genuine counterparts, a relationship that seems to be required if simulation is to produce successful mental-state attributions

BELIEF AND ACCEPTANCE AS FEATURES OF GROUPS

Margaret Gilbert

Abstract

In everyday discourse groups or collectives are often said to believe this or that. The author has previously developed an account of the phenomenon to which such collective belief statements refer. According to this account, in terms that are explained, a group believes that *p* if its members are jointly committed to believe that *p* as a body. Those who fulfill these conditions are referred to here as collectively believing* that *p*. Some philosophers – here labeled rejectionists – have argued that collective belief* is not belief but rather acceptance. This paper presents several arguments against rejectionism. One has to do with the proper methodology for arriving at an account of belief. Two address rejectionist claims to the effect that collective beliefs* lack key features of belief in general, the features in question being “aiming at truth” and having a particular relation to the will. A fourth notes that there is a phenomenon more apt for the label of “collective acceptance” than is the phenomenon of collective belief*.

COLLECTIVE AGENTS AND COGNITIVE ATTITUDES

Anthonie Meijers

Abstract

Propositional attitudes, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions, can be attributed to collective agents. In my paper I focus on cognitive attitudes, and I explore the various types of collective beliefs. I argue that there is a whole spectrum of collective beliefs, and I distinguish between two extremes: the weak opinion poll conception and the strong agreement-based conception. Strong collective beliefs should be understood in terms of the acceptance of a proposition rather than of belief proper. They are not purely epistemic and involve practical considerations. To believe that p collectively in the strong sense is to adopt a policy to use that proposition in the group's deliberations about future actions.

CHALLENGING EPISTEMIC INDIVIDUALISM

Deborah Perron Tollefsen

Abstract

Contemporary analytic epistemology exhibits an individualistic bias. The standard analyses of knowledge found in current epistemological discussions assume that the only epistemic agents worthy of philosophical consideration are individual cognizers. The idea that collectives could be genuine knowers has received little, if any, serious consideration. This individualistic bias seems to be motivated by the view that epistemology is about things that go on inside the head. In this paper I challenge this type of epistemic individualism by arguing that certain groups are intentional agents and that cognition occurs at the level of groups. In section I, I extend a plausible and well-defended account of individual intentionality to organizations. In section II, I appeal to research on distributed cognition in order to challenge the view that cognition occurs exclusively in the individual mind-brain. Having established that groups can be believers and cognizers, I turn to the issue of the justification of group belief. In section III, consider whether a reliabilist account of justification can be extended to groups.

FROM AN EXTERNALISTIC POINT OF VIEW: UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL

Gerhard Preyer

Abstract

The circle between belief and meaning has revolutionized our understanding of communication. In this article I will sketch from the triangulation model of radical interpretation an answer to the question: "How does semantics take effect in social science?", that is, it is to show "How do we link the mental, language, and the social?" I resystemize the principle of charity by the principle of natural epistemic justice and complete triangulation with the social frame of reference. Therefore, to break into the circle between belief and meaning leads us to the structure of elementary systems of communication as the framework within which we ascribe attitudes and actions. In this framework, together with the reformulation of the task of RI, we find an answer of the Burge-problem that the intelligible redescription and explanation of behavior take also effects on social considerations. In the procedure of RI also the problem of background theories emerges, and we border on the epistemic capacity of speakers that limits our understanding in general. In the last step it is shown – looking back to the controversy between individualism and holism (collectivism) in social science – that group-predicates can not instantiate ontologically to individual entities.

ARE "CONTEXTS AND EVENTS" EQUIVALENT? POSSIBILITIES FOR AN ONTOLOGICAL SYMBIOSIS

Steven Miller

Abstract

The article is an attempt to analyze the central but troublesome term "context." While the concept has important empirical implications for the special sciences (indeed, they may not be possible without it), the focus here is to identify and assess its meta physical and, especially, ontological status. After reviewing a number of perspectives directed to understanding the origins of the term's ambiguity and vagueness, it is suggested that the metaphysical domain of "events-theory" may have interesting parallels with what constitutes a "context." However, although some aspects of context may be assimilated by the events-theory perspective, others are more resistant to such an interpretation. Implications for further investigation are suggested.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTS AND THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY. CONFRONTING SEARLE (1964) WITH SEARLE (1995)

Frank A. Hindriks

Abstract

In 1964 Searle argued against the naturalistic fallacy thesis that an ought-statement can in fact be derived from is-statements. From an analysis of this argument and of Searle's social ontology of 1995 – which includes a full-blown theory of institutional facts – I conclude that this argument is unsound on his own (later) terms. The conclusion that can now be drawn from Searle's argument is that social or institutional obligations are epistemically objective even though they are observer-dependent. I go on to argue that the strength of such obligations depends on the strength of the underlying collective acceptance, which is a kind of collective intentionality. I also point out that all normativity in Searle's framework can be traced back to either individual or collective intentionality. This bars him from providing an account of intention-independent moral facts.

GROUP ACTION AND GROUP RESPONSIBILITY

Pekka Mäkelä and Raimo Tuomela

Abstract

In this paper a social group's (retrospective) responsibility for its actions and their consequences are investigated from a philosophical point of view. Building on Tuomela's theory of group action, the paper argues that group responsibility can be analyzed in terms of what its members (jointly) think and do qua group members. When a group is held responsible for some action, its members, acting qua members of the group, can collectively be regarded as praiseworthy or blameworthy, in the light of some normative standard, for what the group has done. The paper gives a necessary and sufficient conditions analysis of a group's responsibility for its actions and their outcomes, and the conditions can be cashed out in terms of the group members' joint (and other) actions.

COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT: A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN COOPERATION

Lambèr Royackers and Vincent Buskens

Abstract

Organizations can be seen as a collection of interacting agents to achieve a certain task: a collective task. Since such a task is beyond the capacity of an individual agent, the agents have to communicate, cooperate, coordinate, and negotiate with each other, to achieve the collective task. In distributed artificial intelligence (DAI) theories of organizations, it is emphasized that 'commitment' is a crucial notion to analyze a collective activity or the structure of an organization. In this paper, we analyze the notion of commitment to gain more insight in the social interactions between the agents in an organization. Many social interactions between agents demand the use of commitments to reach socially efficient or avoid socially inefficient outcomes. Commitments express the desires, goals, or intentions of the agents in an interaction. Using a game-theoretic model, we will show that, depending on the incentive structure, different interactions require different types of commitments to reach socially efficient outcomes. Based on these results, we discuss whether existing (or slightly adapted) logical formalizations are adequate for the description of certain types of commitments and which formalization is suitable for reaching a socially efficient outcome in a specific interaction.

JUSTIFICATION AND CONSENSUS: THE PEIRCEAN APPROACH

Frederick F. Schmitt

Abstract

It is commonly recognized that the justified beliefs of an individual subject can be supported or undermined by a consensus on the proposition in the subject's community. A more controversial view is that justified belief turns on consensus in a deeper respect: justified beliefs are correlated with consensual beliefs in a way to which we must attend when we evaluate or theoretically describe justified belief. Call this a consensus account of justified belief. C. S. Peirce proposed such an account, deriving from a more basic fixation theory of justified belief. I regard Peirce's proposal as the most plausible consensus account now available, and his fixation basis for the account as the strongest available basis for a consensus account. In this paper, I describe Peirce's fixation account in detail, and I elaborate his argument for the account. I defend the argument up to a point. In the end, however, the argument rests on an implausible empirical psychological assumption about belief-fixation. I list reasons for rejecting this assumption. The result should discourage enthusiasm about a consensus account of justified belief.