



# GROUP BELIEF: DEFENDING A MINIMAL VERSION OF SUMMATIVISM

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Beliefs are commonly attributed to groups or collective entities. But what is the nature of group belief? Summativism and non-summativism are two main rival views regarding the nature of group belief. On the one hand, summativism holds that, necessarily, a group  $g$  has a belief  $B$  only if at least one individual  $i$  is both a member of  $g$  and has  $B$ . On the other hand, non-summativism holds that it is possible for a group  $g$  to have a belief  $B$  even if no member of  $g$  has  $B$ . My aim in this paper is to consider whether divergence arguments for non-summativism and against summativism about group belief are sound. Such divergence arguments aim to show that there can be a divergence between belief at the group level and the corresponding belief at the individual level. I will argue that these divergence arguments do not decisively defeat a minimal version of summativism. In order to accomplish this goal, I have the following plan: In section 2, I will analyze the structure of two important counterexamples against the summativist view, which are based on divergence arguments. Such counterexamples are based on the idea that a group decides to adopt a particular group belief, even if none of its members holds the belief in question. However, in section 3, I will show that these counterexamples fail, because they can be explained without the need to posit group beliefs. More specifically, I argue that in these apparent counterexamples, we have only a ‘group acceptance’ phenomenon and not a ‘group belief’ phenomenon. For this conclusion, I advance two arguments: in subsection 3.1, I formulate an argument from doxastic involuntarism, and in subsection 3.2, I develop an argument from truth connection. Thus, summativism is not defeated by divergence arguments. Lastly, in section 4, I will conclude with some advantages of summativism.

**Keywords:** group epistemology, group belief, summativism, non-summativism

# ГРУППОВЫЕ ВЕРОВАНИЯ: ЗАЩИЩАЯ МИНИМАЛЬНУЮ ВЕРСИЮ СУММАТИВИЗМА

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Убеждения обычно приписываются группам или коллективным образованиям. Но какова природа групповых убеждений? Суммативизм и не-суммативизм – два основных конкурирующих взгляда на природу групповых убеждений. С одной стороны, суммативизм утверждает, что группа  $g$  обязательно имеет убеждение  $B$  только в том случае, если хотя бы один индивид  $i$  одновременно является членом  $g$  и имеет  $B$ . С другой стороны, не-суммативизм утверждает, что возможно, что группа  $g$  имеет убеждение  $B$ , даже если ни один из членов группы  $g$  не имеет  $B$ . Моя цель в этой статье состоит в том,



чтобы рассмотреть, являются ли аргументы расхождения в пользу не-суммативизма и против суммативизма относительно групповых убеждений правильными. Такие аргументы направлены на то, чтобы показать, что может быть расхождение между верой на групповом уровне и соответствующей верой на индивидуальном уровне. Я покажу, что эти аргументы расхождения не вполне опровергают минимальную версию суммативизма. В разделе 2 я проанализирую структуру двух важных контрпримеров против суммативистской точки зрения, которые основаны на аргументах расхождения. Такие контрпримеры основаны на идее, что группа решает принять конкретное групповое верование, даже если ни один из ее членов не придерживается данного убеждения. Однако в разделе 3 я покажу, что эти контрпримеры не работают, поскольку их можно объяснить без необходимости постулировать групповые убеждения. А именно, я утверждаю, что в этих очевидных контрпримерах мы имеем дело только с феноменом «группового принятия», а не с феноменом «групповых убеждений». Для этого вывода я выдвигаю два аргумента: в подразделе 3.1 я формулирую аргумент, основанный на докстатическом инволютаризме, а в подразделе 3.2 я развиваю аргумент, основанный на связи истины. Таким образом, суммативизм не может быть побежден аргументами расхождения. И наконец, в разделе 4 я остановлюсь на некоторых преимуществах суммативизма.

**Ключевые слова:** групповая эпистемология, групповые убеждения, суммативизм, не-суммативизм

## 1. Introduction: Nature of Group Belief

Beliefs are commonly attributed to groups or collective entities. For example, the Catholic Church believes that papal statements made *ex cathedra* are infallible; the left-wing parliamentary group believes that cannabis consumption should be legalized; the World Health Organization believes in the successful production of new vaccines, tests, and treatments for COVID-19; the United Nations believes that coronavirus will widen global inequality. These facts raise the following question: What is the nature of group belief?

Understanding group belief is important, because we want to grasp what it means to say that a group has a justified belief or knowledge and to understand how to deal with disagreement among groups. In more practical terms, with a good account of group belief, we can attribute responsibilities to groups. For instance, if the Catholic Church believed that some of its priests committed acts of pedophilia but lied about it, then we might attribute responsibility to the institution<sup>1</sup>. But in this case, who should be held responsible: just the institution or also some of its members? The answer to this problem depends on the nature of group belief.

<sup>1</sup> To understand the complete case, see the film *Spotlight* 2015 directed by Tom McCarthy.



Summativism and non-summativism are two main rival views regarding the nature of *group belief*. According to the summativist view, to ascribe a belief to a group is to indirectly ascribe belief to its members<sup>2</sup>. But there are several versions of summativism, some more plausible than others. Following Lackey [2020, p. 187; 2021], one can distinguish between two central versions of summativism: a conservative and a liberal version. On the one hand, the conservative version says that a group  $g$  has a belief  $B$  if and only if all or most of the members of  $g$  have that belief  $B$ ; so, the sum of the members of  $g$ 's beliefs determines what  $g$  believes. On the other hand, the liberal version holds that a group  $g$  has a belief  $B$  if and only if some members of  $g$  have that belief  $B$ .

At first sight, the liberal version is more plausible than the conservative, because there are groups, such as political parties, in which only a small number of the individual members hold a specific belief and yet those members are particularly influential<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, in this liberal version, a particular belief can be attributed to a group  $g$  even if only one of its members has  $B$ . For example, this is the case when a leader, like the Pope in the Catholic Church, holds a specific belief on behalf of his institution.

But this liberal version also has some serious problems: we can imagine a case where some member of a group  $g$  has a belief  $B$  and yet  $g$  does not have  $B$ . For example, suppose members of the next Vatican Council are deliberating about whether women can be ordained as priests. Imagine that half of this Council believes that women can be priests and that the other half rejects this belief. In this case, we have at least one element of the Vatican Council that believes that women can be priests, but the group itself does not have that belief. Moreover, given the way this liberal version of summativism is presented, there may be a problem when two members of a group have incompatible beliefs. That is, the group could have an inconsistent or contradictory set of beliefs.

To overcome these problems, we can present a more plausible and minimal version of summativism that provides only a *necessary*, but not itself sufficient, condition for group belief. This minimal version holds that a group  $g$  has a belief  $B$  *only if* some members of  $g$  have that belief  $B$ . So, the minimal summativist view, hereafter  $S$ , characterizes group belief as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> This perspective was initially suggested by Quinton [1976] and Cohen [1989, p. 383]. The summativist view does not necessarily imply that group belief is merely a metaphor or that there is no group belief in its own right. It is possible to defend a summativist perspective that accepts the existence of group belief in its own right, while arguing that it is somehow reducible to the beliefs of (all or some) group members. In this case, a reductive view of group belief is defended rather than an eliminativist view.

<sup>3</sup> The liberal version of summativism can accommodate the existence of *operational members* in groups. Operational members are those who have the relevant decision-making authority.



Necessarily, a group  $g$  has a belief  $B$  only if at least one individual  $i$  is both a member of  $g$  and has  $B$ .

$$\Box(Bg \rightarrow \exists i(i \in g \wedge Bi))$$

By contrast, the non-summativist view of group belief rejects this thesis, holding that group belief might diverge from individual members' beliefs. So, a group  $g$  can have a belief  $B$  even when no member of  $g$  has  $B$ . There are also several versions of non-summativism<sup>4</sup>. The most promising version is the joint acceptance account defended by Gilbert [1989, p. 306]:

A group  $g$  believes that  $p$  if and only if the members of  $g$  jointly accept that  $p$ . The members of  $g$  jointly accept that  $p$  if and only if it is common knowledge in  $g$  that the members of  $g$  individually have intentionally and openly (...) expressed their willingness jointly to accept that  $p$  with the other members of  $g$ <sup>5</sup>.

This is a non-summativist account, given that it is not necessary for group  $g$  to have a belief  $B$  that any individual member of  $g$  has  $B$ . Instead, what is necessary (and sufficient) is joint *acceptance*, not belief, in some proposition<sup>6</sup>.

My aim in this paper is to consider whether divergence arguments for non-summativism and against summativism about group belief are sound. I will argue that these divergence arguments do not decisively defeat a minimal version of summativism ( $S$ ). In section 2, I will analyze the structure of two important counterexamples against the summativist view, which are based on divergence arguments. However, in section 3, I will develop two types of argument to show that these counterexamples fail. Thus,  $S$  is not defeated by divergence arguments. Lastly, in section 4, I will conclude with some advantages of  $S$ .

## 2. Divergence Arguments Against $S$

The minimal summativist view ( $S$ ) is intuitive for some; however, it has come under attack by *divergence arguments*, which aim to show that there can be a divergence between belief at the group level and the corresponding belief at the individual level. The general structure of divergence arguments against  $S$  is the following:

1. ( $S \rightarrow \Box(Bg \rightarrow \exists i(i \in g \wedge Bi))$ )
2.  $\diamond(Bg \wedge \neg \exists i(i \in g \wedge Bi))$
3.  $\therefore \neg S$  [1,2,MT]

<sup>4</sup> See Gilbert [1987], Tuomela [1992], List and Pettit [2011].

<sup>5</sup> See also Gilbert [2014, p. 137].

<sup>6</sup> I will explore the difference between belief and acceptance in the sections below.



The non-summativ view is based on this argumentative framework, according to which group belief is not understood in terms of individual belief. Premise 1 uncontroversially states that if minimal summativism is true, then in cases of group belief, there must be at least one individual who is both a member of  $g$  and has  $B$ . Premise 2 denies the consequent:

It is possible for a group  $g$  to have a belief  $B$  even if no member of  $g$  has  $B$ .

In other words, individual belief is not necessary for group belief. This is because we can imagine a case in which a group decides to adopt a particular group belief, even if none of its members holds the belief in question. In support of this premise, cases such as this are presented<sup>7</sup>:

**MARRIAGE CASE:** Suppose the Catholic Church forms a committee to deliberate on gay marriage. After hours of discussion, all of the members jointly agree that gay marriage should not be permitted. So the committee, as a group in a very conservative church, has this belief. However, it turns out that not a single member of the church committee actually believes this; instead, each one privately has a liberal perspective and supports gay marriage. But this is not the belief of the church committee, since its members felt that their decision should represent the Catholic Church and its traditional perspective.

This case supports non-summativism by showing that  $S$  is false, because the church committee believes that gay marriage should be prohibited, even though none of its members hold this belief. Moreover, the attribution of belief to the church committee is supported by the group's actions. For example, the group asserts that gay marriage should be prohibited, defends the view in public, conceives arguments in favor of this belief, publishes materials condemning gay marriage, etc. Also, based on these types of actions, we can assess and predict group behavior. For example, given what was publicly pronounced by the group, it would be irrational for the group to publish a document approving of gay marriage. In addition to this case, to defend premise 2, Gardiner [m.s.] presents a case with a slightly different structure:

**BIRD CASE:** "A researcher congregates 200 people and shows them photos of 10 birds. The subjects are asked individually to rank the birds with regard to beauty and then as a group to nominate one bird as the most beautiful. Each of the subjects ranks BlueBird second best, but the remaining rankings diverge widely. For every bird that some rank as most beautiful, a larger group ranks it much lower. After some deliberation, the group nominates BlueBird as most beautiful".

<sup>7</sup> For cases with a similar structure see Gilbert [1987], Mathiesen [2011], Gilbert and Priest [2013], Gilbert and Pilchman [2014], Bird [2019], Lackey [2020; 2021].



According to Gardiner [m.s.], it seems that, in this case, the group believes that BlueBird is the most beautiful, but no individual has this belief (because individual members believe BlueBird is second-best, not best). If this is correct, then individual belief is not necessary for group belief, and therefore the minimal summativist view is false. Based on Bird [2019, p. 276] it can be said that:

All the members of a group may want the group to endorse  $p$  but (...) none of the individuals believe  $p$ . They may have a variety of reasons for wanting the group to have a belief that they do not themselves share. It might be politically expedient that group adopts the belief  $p$  even if the members individually believe otherwise (it may even be common knowledge within the group that they believe otherwise).

While summativism appears to struggle with the two cases (MARRIAGE and BIRD), non-summativism easily accommodates them. According to the joint acceptance account, in such cases we have a group belief, even though none of its members have the belief, because members of that group jointly accept the relevant proposition.

### 3. Defeating Divergence Arguments

In this section, I argue that divergence arguments are not sound. In particular, the proposed counterexamples, MARRIAGE and BIRD, fail to defeat minimal summativism, because they can be explained without the need to posit group beliefs. More specifically, I argue that in these apparent counterexamples, we have only a ‘group acceptance’ phenomenon and not a ‘group belief’ phenomenon. For this conclusion, I advance two arguments: in subsection 3.1, I formulate an argument from doxastic involuntarism, and in subsection 3.2, I develop an argument from truth connection.

#### 3.1. Argument from Doxastic Involuntarism

Let’s start with the MARRIAGE case. The proposition expressly endorsed by the group is as follows:

(M) Gay marriage should be prohibited.

There is a plausible interpretation of the case that does not imply that the church committee believes (M). This is because the church committee endorses (M) due to some voluntary and pragmatic joint acceptance (viz. the group wants to represent the Catholic Church). Thus, (M) is *accepted* but not *believed* by the group. To support this, let’s look at the difference between ‘belief’ and ‘acceptance’.



Following the thesis of *doxastic involuntarism*, we have no direct voluntary control over our doxastic states of belief<sup>8</sup>. This thesis is *prima facie* plausible. For example, can we directly choose to believe that the USA is still a British colony? Can we directly choose not to believe that it is raining when, as we walk down the street, we see and feel the rain falling? In each of these cases, the answer seems negative; we don't have direct voluntary control over our beliefs, given that beliefs conform to the evidence of cognitive agents, aiming normatively at the truth<sup>9</sup>.

But we can have direct voluntary control over *acceptances*, because we accept a proposition *p* when we make or report a *decision* about *p*, in a context of deliberation about practical concerns. Furthermore, an acceptance that *p* is guided by practical concerns that may not be related to any concern with *p*'s truth<sup>10</sup>. For example, imagine the case of a lawyer who *believes* his client is guilty but, in the context of the court, defends him and *accepts* that he is innocent. Following Vahid [2009, p. 24]:

Accepting that is being disposed to employ *p* in one's deliberations and to act upon it to guide one's behavior by relying on it in one's theoretical or practical reasoning. In contrast to belief, acceptance is said to be under one's direct voluntary control.

Thus, *belief* and *acceptance* are different states. On the one hand, belief is an involuntary dispositional state, aims at truth, follows evidence, is ideally coherent, and comes in degrees. On the other hand, acceptance is voluntary, aims at pragmatic success, follows interests and desires, and allows for contradiction<sup>11</sup>.

Given the distinction between belief and acceptance described above, we can state that (M) is not believed by the church committee; instead, it is plausibly accepted by the group. For this committee adopts (M) through a directly voluntary choice from its members. Saying that (M) is the object of *group acceptance* also allows us to state that (M) may be the official position or the public view of the church committee, which can explain the corresponding group behavior.

Something similar can be said in the BIRD case. Here too, for pragmatic reasons, there was a voluntary joint agreement to accept the following proposition:

(B) BlueBird is the most beautiful.

<sup>8</sup> Here it is appropriate to distinguish between direct and indirect control of our actions. On the one hand, *S* has direct control over  $\phi$ -ing if *S* can choose  $\phi$  simply by an act of will or by performing a singular action over a relatively short period of time. On the other hand, *S* has indirect voluntary control over  $\phi$ -ing if *S* can choose  $\phi$  by continuously performing a series of actions over a considerable period of time. For example, we have indirect but not direct control over body weight.

<sup>9</sup> See Plantinga [1993, p. 24] and Alston [2005, p. 63].

<sup>10</sup> This idea will be further explored in the next subsection 3.2.

<sup>11</sup> See Cohen [1989], Bratman [1992], and Buckareff [2004].



As in the case of (M), there is a plausible interpretation according to which (B) is not the object of group belief in this BIRD case but rather the object of group acceptance. Thus, given that in the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases, propositions (M) and (B) are potentially accepted rather than believed, these cases do not establish that group belief can occur without corresponding individual beliefs. The following argument captures this idea:

1. In the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases, the adoption of proposition (M) or (B) by the members of the corresponding group  $g$  is directly voluntary, resulting  $g$  in being in a state  $F$ .
2. If 1, then  $g$ 's individual members directly, voluntarily brought about  $F$ .
3. But, if state  $F$  is a belief, then being in  $F$  cannot have been directly, voluntarily brought about. [Doxastic involuntarism]
4. Therefore, in the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases, (M) and (B) are not believed.

An analogy can be drawn between individual and group cases. At the individual level, it is possible for a person to accept a proposition  $p$  while believing that  $p$  is false. For example, suppose that a President of the Republic personally believes that any kind of euthanasia is immoral and should not be legalized. However, suppose he receives a voluntary euthanasia bill from parliament, built by a large majority, and agrees to approve it. In this case, the President accepts, but does not believe, that euthanasia should be legalized<sup>12</sup>. If this can occur at an individual level, then it can also occur at a group level. Thus, just as the president accepts but does not believe the proposition under consideration, so the open-minded church committee accepts but does not believe that gay marriage should not be allowed. Likewise, the bird-loving group accepts but does not believe that BlueBird is the most beautiful.

It may be objected that the President, in this functional and institutional role, not only accepts but also *believes* that euthanasia should be legalized (while granting that as a private individual, he believes no such thing). But the objection fails. For the President's behavior seems to be related to a voluntary decision to agree to what is approved by parliamentary consensus. Since the President's public attitude is directly, voluntarily adopted, it is a state of acceptance rather than a state of belief.

Moreover, we can imagine another case, which involves no institutional role, in which a person can accept a proposition  $p$  while believing that  $p$  is false. For example, consider a case where a philosopher believes that God does not exist, but accepts the existence of God to develop

<sup>12</sup> Another case: consider a situation where a teacher, who grew up in a very conservative religious community, has always believed that the theory of evolution is false but still accepts it for teaching purposes. See Lackey [2008].





an original theodicy that will bring him recognition. Again, just as there can be acceptance in individual cases without belief, groups can also have states of acceptance without belief. So, in the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases, what we have is a group acceptance and not a group belief.

### 3.2. *Argument from Truth Connection*

An additional argument starts from the idea that ‘belief’ has an intrinsic connection with truth, in the sense that if *S* believes that *p*, then *p* *seems true to S* (even if *p* is false). Following Cohen [1989, p. 368], “belief that *p* (...) is a disposition to feel it true that *p*”. In other words, belief has a mind-to-world direction of fit; or, as Platts [1997, p. 256] claims, “beliefs aim at the true, and their being true is their fitting the world; (...) beliefs should be changed to fit with the world, not vice versa”. But, ‘acceptance’ does not have this intrinsic connection with the truth or mind-to-world direction of fit; for we can accept something for practical purposes and not because of its seeming truth. Thus, *S* can accept *p* even when *S* feels that *p* is false<sup>13</sup>.

Considering this difference in connection with truth and direction of fit, it seems more appropriate to describe the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases as cases of ‘group acceptance’ and not of ‘group belief’. For in both cases, there is no feeling that the proposition, (M) or (B), adopted by the group is true. After all, the church committee holds that gay marriage should be prohibited for pragmatic reasons, i.e. in order to represent the Church’s position and not because it seems to be the case. Likewise, the bird-loving group claims that BlueBird is the most beautiful, not because it seems to be true, but for purely pragmatic reasons, i.e. in order to produce consensus. Given that the views that such groups adopt are not based on the feeling that these views are true, the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases do not have the mind-to-world direction of fit, and so they don’t exhibit a group belief, but a group acceptance instead.

This same conclusion can be established using a ‘knowledge-first’ account of belief. According to Williamson [2000], [m.s., p. 7], this account holds that “to believe *p* is to be disposed to treat *p* as if one knew *p* – that is, to be disposed to treat *p* as agents treat propositions they know”. By contrast, with ‘acceptance’, we “treat a proposition as a working assumption, and integrate it into our practical reasoning, without believing it. We may even know that it is false”. Returning to the analysis of the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases, based on the knowledge-first account, we can claim that the group members do not treat the propositions under consideration, (M) and (B), as if they knew them. Instead, they are

<sup>13</sup> This argument is based on Wray [2001], Meijers [2002], Hakli [2007].



individually willing to regard such propositions as false and collectively rely on (M) and (B) for merely practical purposes. So, again, we are facing a phenomenon of group acceptance and not of group belief.

One might object, following Ridder [m.s.], that one can add a plausible truth-connection condition for the non-summative view of group belief. Ridder [m.s.]’s proposal is as follows: Group  $g$  believes that  $p$  only if it seems to all the operative group members of  $g$  that the procedure they used jointly to accept that  $p$  is reliable, i.e., likely to lead to true outputs. Thus, to have a group belief, in addition to requiring joint acceptance, it is also necessary that the process used seems reliable to the group’s operational members.

However, this kind of strategy does not invalidate the points I have made regarding the MARRIAGE and BIRD cases. Firstly, it is doubtful that the operational members of the MARRIAGE and BIRD groups hold that the process they are using is reliable, i.e. probably leading to the truth. Instead, their goals seem to be purely pragmatic. Second, if these groups follow this principle of connection with truth, it is doubtful that no operational member individually believes what the group believes. For, if there are individual members who consider the relevant process reliable, then it is likely that such members will individually believe the output of that process. This is similar to arguing that if it seems to me that a given person is expert and reliable on a given domain, then, if there are no defeaters, it is rational and natural to believe what the person testifies about that domain. Thus, the condition added by Ridder [m.s.] seems to be more consistent with a minimal summative view than a non-summative one.

#### 4. Conclusion: Holding a Minimal Summativism

To conclude this paper, I want to briefly highlight some advantages of a minimal version of summative view. First, it has advantages over the non-summative perspective. Non-summative cannot explain group lies; in particular, it cannot explain the difference between ‘group beliefs’ and ‘group lies’ [see Lackey, 2020]. But this is not a difficulty for a minimal version of summative view. Moreover, from a non-summative view assuming the joint acceptance account, it seems difficult to draw the distinction between ‘group belief’ and ‘group acceptance’. A more basic advantage of the view has to do with being more parsimonious. For explaining group belief does not require new notions distinct from ordinary and individual beliefs. For example, it is not committed to a group mind that exists over and above the minds of individual members. Thus, it allows us to maintain the intuition that group belief is related to individual beliefs. Since, as I have argued, the divergence arguments don’t implement



successful counterexamples, a minimal version of summativism remains a live option<sup>14</sup>.

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