

A Conservative Approach to Group Inquiry

Nicholas Smith

Alabama A&M University

doi: 10.2478/disp-2023-0015

BIBLID: [0873-626X (2023) 70; pp. 328–50]

Abstract

Recent years have seen an explosion of research on inquiry. However, there remains comparatively little work on the nature of group inquiry, which is surprising given that group inquiry is such a commonplace activity. According to this account, group inquiry cannot be explained using the standard approaches to theories of group action and belief, because these theories fail to explain the actions of large groups or the division of labor that large inquiries may require. If correct, it is a devastatingly powerful objection to many accounts of group action. It is surely a requirement of any plausible theory of group action that it be able to explain commonplace actions, and it would be bizarre and problematic if standard theories of group action could not explain group inquiry. Therefore, if the standard views cannot serve as the theoretical foundation for group inquiry, we would be right to question whether these theories should be accepted. I argue that we don't have to accept this consequence because the objection fails, and I provide an account of group inquiry based on one of these approaches to group action, showing that we already have the tools we need to explain group inquiry. I end by arguing that using the mainstream approaches to group action as part of an explanation of group inquiry has an advantage over other approaches: it provides an explanation of what groups are.

Keywords

inquiry; joint action; social ontology

1 Introduction

Recent years have seen an explosion of research on the definition of inquiry (Archer [2021], Falbo [2023a], Friedman [2013, 2017, 2019, 2023], Palmira [2018], Smith [2020], among

many others) and related topics such as double checking (Smith [2023], Woodard [2022]) and the norms of inquiry (e.g. Falbo [2023b], Friedman [2020], Millson [2020], Thorstad [2022]). However, there is little on the nature of group inquiry in the inquiry literature (Habgood-Coote [2019, 2022]), which is surprising given that group inquiry is such a commonplace activity. In giving this account, Habgood-Coote argues that group inquiry cannot be explained using mainstream or standard approaches to theories of group action and belief, such as those developed by Bratman [2013], Gilbert [1987, 1990, 2014], Searle [1990] and Tuomela [2007] because these theories are insufficient to explain the actions of large groups or the division of labor that large inquiries may require.¹ If Habgood-Coote is correct, this is interesting both because he has developed the dominant account of a widespread epistemic activity, and because this amounts to a devastatingly powerful objection to many standard approaches to group action. Group inquiry is commonplace and inquiry is perhaps *the* paradigmatic epistemic activity. It is surely a requirement of any plausible theory of group action that it be able to explain commonplace actions, and it would be bizarre and problematic if the standard theories could not explain it. Therefore, if the standard views cannot serve as the theoretical foundation for group inquiry, we would be right to question whether these theories should be foundational *at all*.

Given how commonplace group inquiry is and how central inquiry is to our lives, if Habgood-Coote is correct we would be forced to abandon, or at least seriously modify the standard theories. This would be a moment of substantial change, perhaps even philosophical revolution. At a bare minimum, we'd be forced to re-evaluate the plausibility of nearly everything the advocates of these theories have done with their theories, as well as every bit of social philosophy that takes the standard views as their starting point. We would be in danger of losing the theoretical foundation for everything from some views of rights and political obligation² to explanations of everyday phenomena that we intuitively recognize. We may dispute the finer details, but up to this point the standard theories seem to have done a decent job of explaining what it means to do something *together* rather than merely alongside or at the same time as someone else. The damage would not be contained to philosophy. Work in child psychology purports to offer empirical accounts of group action and group intentions of exactly the sort described by standard theories of groups (e.g. Carpenter [2009], Gräfenhain *et al.* [2013], Rakoczy [2007],

¹ I'll refer to these theories as a group with the term 'standard theories'.

² See, for example, Gilbert [2018].

Tomasello and Carpenter [2007], Warnecken *et al.* [2012]), and evolutionary psychologists theorize about how humans acquired the psychological capacities to act in the sorts of groups standard theories of group action describe (e.g. Tomasello [2005, 2016, 2018]). If these theories are no good, what is it that these other fields have confirmed or assumed? In short, we'd be forced to ask ourselves the question: how did we go so long in working with these theories without seeing that they had this massive shortcoming? How did they offer plausible explanations of so many other phenomena, only to crumble when confronted with inquiry?

I argue that we don't have to accept these consequences because Habgood-Coote's objection ultimately fails. I will defend the standard views by providing a theory of group inquiry based on Margaret Gilbert's approach to group action, a view which Habgood-Coote explicitly rejects. I will assume Gilbert's definition of a group, and views of joint belief and joint action. Using these tools, I will show that Gilbert's social epistemology can explain joint inquiry, including large ones involving a division of labor. I call my approach to group inquiry conservative because it aims to show that we already have the tools we need to explain group inquiry. I end by arguing that using the mainstream approaches to group action as part of an explanation of group inquiry has an advantage over other approaches: it provides an explanation of what groups are. Without an accompanying account of the ontology of groups, it is unclear which inquiries really count as group inquiries (rather than, for example, collections of individuals who happen to pursue the same question) and thus which inquiries call for a certain kind of explanation.³

2 Group inquiry and Habgood-Coote's view

We need to begin an account of group inquiry with a general definition of inquiry. My goal is to defend a method for defining group inquiry rather than a particular definition of inquiry, so a fairly abstract definition will suffice. Inquiry is an activity with the constitutive aim of finding the answer to a question. The activity has a privileged subject, the

³ The goal of this paper is not a wholesale defense of Gilbert's social epistemology or ontology. I don't expect an argument that the view can account for group inquiry to be the deciding factor in whether one accepts the view. Nonetheless, the inability to account for such a mundane epistemic phenomenon as inquiry would be a serious problem. In this vein, the objections I consider to my position will primarily be ones that relate to the ability of Gilbert's view to serve as the basis for an account of inquiry, rather than all possible objections to the view.

inquirer, who has the question and seeks the answer. Inquiry ends when the inquirer has the answer to their question. This answer typically comes in the form of a doxastic state like true belief, knowledge, or understanding.⁴ There is debate about which state is the success condition for inquiry,⁵ but nobody defends a view of inquiry according to which any state less demanding than belief can be a successful termination of inquiry. Inquiry is a commonplace activity, and inquiries run the gamut from simple ('where are my keys?') to immensely complicated ('does theory T successfully unify quantum mechanics and general relativity?')

Like Habgood-Coote, I assume that group inquiry is the same kind of activity as inquiry, so there is no need to re-define inquiry in order to define group inquiry. A group inquiry, then, is an inquiry which has a group as the privileged subject of inquiry (*i.e.* a group inquirer). This means that group inquiry is the activity of a group undertaken for the sake of answering a question held by the group, and the group's believing an answer to that question is a minimal success condition for their group inquiry. Like individual inquiries, group inquiries are commonplace and run the gamut from the simple ('Where should we park for this restaurant?') to the highly complex (scientific investigations run by large laboratories or research groups). This is the conservative view of group inquiry: it is regular inquiry, just scaled up. Each component of individual inquiry (the inquirer who has the question, the actions, the belief that such-and-such is the answer) has a group-sized analogue (a group has a question, acts as a group to find the answer, and believes as a group that such-and-such is the answer). Since we have a basic account of inquiry, we just need to add an account of the ontology and action theory of groups.

As long as the theory of groups in question is rich enough, inquiry can be scaled up in this way. There are a number of theories of group action and belief (including but not limited to those defended by Bratman [2013], Gilbert [1987, 1990, 2014], Searle [1990] and Tuomela [2007]) which would make this possible. I focus on Gilbert's view, but there are several of these views which might allow one to scale inquiry up from the individual level to the group level. This is exactly what Habgood-Coote argues these views cannot do: "If we work with existing accounts of group action, then we will not be able to give a general

⁴ This account of inquiry is roughly in line with Kelp [2020] and Smith [2020], and is consistent with views defended by Friedman [2013, 2017, 2019] and Palmira [2018].

⁵ For example, Friedman [2013, 2017, 2019] and Peirce [1877] defend some version of belief as the terminus of inquiry, while Kelp [2014] and Williamson [2000] defend knowledge.

account of group inquiry” ([2022: 1103]).

Habgood-Coote gives two reasons the standard accounts of group action and belief are insufficient to explain group inquiry.⁶ First:

The paradigm for understanding group actions has been small-scale, centralised, and co-operative activities, but group inquiry is in many cases large-scale, distributed, and hierarchical. In order to understand these cases, we need an account of group action that can handle large-scale cases. [Habgood-Coote 2022: 1100]

Many group inquiries involve very large groups, but accounts of group action are often developed using examples of small group actions, such as a few people taking a walk together. According to Habgood-Coote, this means that standard theories of group action are insufficient to explain the actions of large groups (Habgood-Coote [2022: 1101–3]).⁷ For example, Gilbert’s view is that a group is a plural subject formed when individuals bind their wills to each other or conditionally commit to each other in a certain way.⁸ This is intuitively intelligible when the group in question is two people going for a walk, as in Gilbert’s classic example. It is less immediately clear what to make of this process of interconnection and conditionally committing when the group in question is large. As Habgood-Coote understands it, large group actions are likely to require some kind of hierarchical structure, but Gilbert’s approach only works for:

what we might call democratic groups, where a group intention must stem from the agree-

⁶ Based on the phrasing of his criticisms, Habgood-Coote’s target seems to be the *sufficiency* of the standard theories of group action for cases of inquiry, rather than the necessity of their use. He thinks they *can’t* explain group inquiry, not that one *needn’t* use them to explain group inquiry. My goal, therefore, is to show that it is at least possible for the standard theories to explain group inquiry by showing that they can explain exactly the cases he argues they can’t.

⁷ Some advocates of these ontologies have accepted at least some of this critique. See, for example, Bratman [2014]. Note that while Habgood-Coote’s objection is focused on inquiry in this context, if it is correct then its impact extends far beyond inquiry. An inability to explain large groups would be a general problem for an ontology of groups.

⁸ It is important to be careful with the word “conditional” here. Gilbert [2023] notes that she is “not supposing that each party is indicating that their personal readiness for joint commitment is conditional on the readiness of whichever others. Rather, as is understood by the parties, if and only if they all openly express their unconditional personal readiness to be jointly committed with the others, in conditions of common knowledge, the joint commitment of them all will be established”.

ment of all members, but it is difficult to see how to apply it to hierarchical groups where a small set of operative members dictates the collective's plan of action, or groups characterised by a division of labour [Habgood-Coote 2022: 1102]

In other words, Habgood-Coote understands Gilbert's view as requiring some kind of egalitarianism for the formation of a real group.

Habgood-Coote's second reason for rejecting standard theories of joint action is that:

Group actions typically involve a division of labour. Although we have a fairly good intuitive grip on the division of labour for actions like making a car or playing a piece of music, it is unclear how to understand the division of labour involved in epistemic tasks. [Habgood-Coote 2022: 1102–3]

Standard theories of joint action supposedly lack the ability to explain the division of labor that specifically epistemic tasks may require. When the inquiry at hand involves only a few agents, it is easy to imagine any number of ways the work might be divided up in order to get to the answer. If both my roommate and I inquire into the location of my missing keys, we might each start digging through couch cushions and piles of laundry until one of us comes across the keys and points it out to the other. The inquiry then ends with us having found the keys and each of us knowing their location. The group had jointly accepted that the location of the keys was a question, and now the group jointly accepts an answer regarding the location of the keys. The process of inquiry for a large group, like one that might be involved in investigating the efficacy and safety of a new drug or vaccine, is much more complicated. There are many tasks that must be completed for the inquiry to succeed, many instructions must be given and plans made, and there are many members of the group inquirer that must be managed in order for these tasks, and thus the inquiry, to be successful. So, a large group inquiry plausibly requires that labor be divided. Different agents will know different things, participate in different parts of the inquiry, and the group may even be so large that agents are unaware who comprises the rest of the group. If standard theories of group action cannot account for this, and Habgood-Coote holds that they cannot, then they fail to account for group inquiries generally.⁹

⁹ The question of the division of epistemic labor is also taken up in Habgood-Coote [2019]. The views there are further developed in Brown [2024]. Below, I take up the objection as formulated by Brown with respect to the Manhattan Project (which we can think of as a very large group inquiry aimed at coming to know

At this point, defenders of standard theories of group action might look for a way to isolate the problem. Perhaps something about large group inquiries requires that they be explained in some unique way. I don't think this approach is promising. We can't isolate group inquiries by appealing to some feature of inquiry because Habgood-Coote's criticisms primarily target theories of group action, not just their application to inquiry. Besides, separating large group inquiries from other group activities merely on the grounds that they're large is profligate if any theory that can account for both small and large inquiries is forthcoming. Rather than making a strategic retreat from explaining group inquiry in the hopes of saving the rest of the view, the best defense for standard approaches to group action is to show that these theories can explain group inquiry.

3 A conservative approach to group inquiry

In this section, I'll show how one can construct an account of group inquiry that uses Margaret Gilbert's views of group action and belief. As discussed in section 1, inquiry is the activity that has the constitutive aim of finding the answer to a question and group actions are those undertaken by a group. Therefore, group inquiries are those inquiries undertaken by a group. It is important that the group in question is not a collection of discrete individuals who merely have the same aim (in this case answering the same question), but a collection of people joined together in a certain way. When the group inquires, they do so *together* or *as one*. The group is the privileged subject of inquiry, the inquirer. It is the group that has the question and the group which acts as one to answer it.

According to Gilbert's view of group belief, the plural subject is created when each person expresses a personal readiness to engage in group activity (in this case, inquiry) and there is common knowledge of this readiness to so engage.

Each party to the ensuing group action says or does something expressive of personal readiness to participate in that action with the other party. And this is "common knowledge" between the parties. To put the "common knowledge" requirement informally here, it is necessary that the relevant expressions be "out in the open" as far as the parties are concerned. [Gilbert 2014: 29]

certain things about the possibility of making nuclear weapons). I show that Gilbert's social ontology can in fact explain the activities of a group this large.

The wills in question are bound simultaneously and interdependently. In the case of an inquiry, once each of the relevant persons expresses a personal readiness to engage in the inquiry with the others in conditions of common knowledge, they are able to walk together and not merely alongside each other (Gilbert [2014: 32]). It is important to note that all group commitments are commitments to *do* something (broadly construed). In so committing, the parties to a group commitment are committed to some goal, and to moving towards that goal as a plural subject (Gilbert [2014: 30–3]). Gilbert [2023: 189] distinguishes between a basic joint commitment, wherein all parties jointly commit directly to something in the democratic way Habgood-Coote describes, and non-basic joint commitments, wherein an authorized subset of a group can determine the commitments of the entire group. A non-basic joint commitment “is established by some person or body of persons that has been authorized, through a basic joint commitment of the parties, to establish further joint commitments of them all”.

Gilbert’s account of plural subjects also enables the straightforward construction of an account of collective belief. Gilbert offers a non-summative,¹⁰ plural subject account of collective belief according to which “the members of a population, *P*, collectively believe that *p* if and only if they are jointly committed to believe that *p* as a body” (Gilbert [2014: 137]). It isn’t the case that all or most members of a group must believe that *P* for the group to believe that *P* (indeed, it might be that no members of the group need believe that *P*) (Gilbert [1987: 191, 194, 2014: 136–7]). For a group to believe, each member of the group must express a conditional commitment to letting *P* stand as the belief of the group. Each member of the group is then committed to act in certain ways with respect to the proposition *P*, including not denying *P*, publicly affirming *P* and not acting in ways with presuppose the falsity of *P* (at least without first making clear that they are not speaking for the group). They are committed “to act as would any one of several mouthpieces of the body in question, thus uttering its beliefs, as opposed to the beliefs of any of its members, including the utterer” (Gilbert [2014: 140]).¹¹

¹⁰ For discussion of summative accounts of group belief, and Gilbert’s arguments against them, see Gilbert [1987: 187–8, 2014: 136].

¹¹ There is a substantial debate as to whether groups can believe. Some, like Gilbert [1987, 2014], Tollefsen [2002, 2003], Tuomela [1992, 2004] and Townsend [2015] hold that groups can believe. Others, like Wray [2001], Hakli [2006, 2007] and Meijers [2002, 2003] reject this possibility. Because I’m assuming that groups can inquire and that inquiry is the same kind of activity at both group and individual levels, I’ll treat groups as believers. Those who reject the idea that groups can believe but accept the idea that groups

4 Inquiring together

In this section, I'll show that standard approaches to group action and belief can, indeed, handle large complex inquiries by using Gilbert's views to explain a paradigmatic group inquiry. I take it as uncontroversial that a large scientific research group attempting to answer some question *Q* counts as a large group inquiry, so this will be my test case. A Gilbertian account of laboratory research goes like this: the members of the lab bind themselves to each other by expressing a readiness to engage in laboratory activity together, on the condition that all others do, and so create a plural subject. This plural subject is the inquirer. The exact details of the binding process will vary across circumstances, but something as simple as signing one's employment paperwork and continuing to show up for work might constitute a suitable expression of readiness to engage in laboratory activity given the readiness of others.¹²

One can build from Gilbert's account of collective belief that *P* to offer an account of collectively having a question *Q*. Suppose the lead researchers¹³ lab are trying to settle

can inquire will need to propose some alternative state at least as robust as belief which groups can achieve in order to terminate inquiry. One common objection to non-summative accounts of group belief is that views like Gilbert's joint acceptance account render group belief voluntarist. Individual belief, however, is typically not thought to be under our direct control in the way doxastic voluntarism would suggest. So, whatever groups have, it must not be belief. Since it is not a fringe position to think of groups as genuinely believing (even opponents of Gilbert's, such as Lackey [2020] offer accounts of what they take to be genuine group belief that retain non-summative elements) and it would be outside the scope of this paper to resolve this issue entirely, I direct interested readers to chapter 4 of Gilbert [2023] for a thorough discussion of the ways in which concepts developed for the epistemology of individuals work when considering the epistemology of groups. Briefly: just because a concept works a certain way for individuals doesn't mean that it will work exactly the same way for groups.

¹² It has been suggested to me that one may sign the employment agreement and continue to show up for work despite not being a member of the group. Perhaps one just wants to get a paycheck and couldn't care less about the actual work of the group. In the absence of other things which suggest that one has abandoned group membership, I would take continuing to function as a member of the group, regardless of one's personal motivations, as a sign that one is still a group member. If someone said 'Oh, I'm not really a member of this group, I just show up here and engage in the work the group does in order to get a paycheck' I would say they were *at least* enough of a group member to remain in sufficiently good standing to justifiably reap the benefits of group membership (*i.e.* pay for one's epistemic labor).

¹³ These lead researchers are what Lackey [2020], following Tuomela, calls "operative members". I'll use this term as well. With respect to non-basic joint commitments, something like signing an employment agreement would certainly constitute being party to a non-basic joint commitment, and thus accepting

on a new research question. In examining previous findings, researcher A notices that a phenomenon R appeared during experimentation, and that R was unexpected and not easily explained away. A suggests ‘What is the explanation for R’ be set as the new research question Q. The remaining directors, B, C, and D, agree. The four of them inform the rest of the laboratory workers that ‘What is the explanation for R’ is the new question Q the lab is trying to answer. Because of the structure of authority in the lab brought about by non-basic joint commitments, the low level workers who take direction from the lead researchers are now committed to treating this question as open, and to engaging in activities appropriate to finding an explanation for R. This doesn’t mean that every single member of the plural inquirer has a personal investment in answering Q, or even thinks that Q is an open question. Perhaps some think R was entirely explained by previous results, and others form no personal views at all on Q, merely doing whatever paperwork comes across their desk. In the same way that Gilbertian group belief does not require that all members of a plural subject must personally believe P in order for the plural subject to believe that P, not all members of the plural inquirer must personally have Q as a question in order for the plural inquirer to have Q as a question. All that matters is that when acting or representing themselves as members of the group, the members of the plural inquirer treat Q as an open question.

Just as individual inquiry is constituted by taking appropriate actions towards finding an answer, group inquiry is constituted by actions towards an answer to that question. Having formed a plural subject, the individuals involved are obliged to each other to behave in certain ways inasmuch as they are, or are acting as, members of the group. In taking on obligations to both treat Q as an open question and to not unilaterally abandon the activity of the plural subject (*i.e.* inquiry), the group has actively taken on Q as an object of inquiry. Whenever the plural subject does anything for the sake of answering the question, it is an instance of inquiring together, a group inquiry. This does *not* mean that all individuals in the group must always, or even most of the time, engage in such activities. Group actions do not require that the entire group do something. It *does* mean that at least sometimes (presumably as determined by the structure and rules of the group) the group members must do things to forward the group’s aim of finding an answer to Q. So, for example, if several members of the plural inquirer get together to analyze the currently collected data to determine the lab’s next steps in answering Q, that is part of the group inquiry. Or, if a

the operative members as one’s superiors with respect to the direction of the group.

relevant experiment for answering Q is run by a single member of the plural inquirer, this too counts as part of the group inquiry even though it is undertaken by a single member of the plural subject because and to the extent that it is done for the sake of resolving the plural inquirer's question.¹⁴

Group inquiries terminate in the same way as individual inquiries. The group lets something P stand as the answer to Q or, equivalently, with the cessation of the group's doubt regarding the answer. In the case of the laboratory, this means that the group commits to letting some explanation for R stand as the group's answer to the question. Perhaps the lab directors make the final decision, they take a vote, or the view of the group is left to the decision of whoever is in charge of writing up the results. If, after the group has committed to letting P stand as the answer, any member of the group were asked if the group had answered Q, or what the group's answer to Q is, the appropriate answer would be that the group takes P to answer the question. It may be the case that the individuals which comprise the plural inquirer do not believe that P answers Q, or have doubts as to the answer to Q. However, when acting as group members, the individuals who comprise the plural inquirer must, on pain of ceasing to be members of the plural inquirer, uphold (or at least not contradict) P as the answer to Q.¹⁵

Given the use of a laboratory as an example, keep in mind the following regarding conditional commitments. A laboratory typically has a director or lead researchers who sets the agenda for the entire group more or less unilaterally, rather than a group of people conditionally committing to each other in a democratic or egalitarian way. This doesn't stand in the way of the lab being a plural subject, any more than a sports team's having an owner

¹⁴ If the individual broke into the lab and ran the experiment on their own with the goal of getting results and publishing them on their own, this would not count as part of the group inquiry because the actions were not *for the sake of* answering the group's question. In the same way that individual inquiry is activity directed at answering one's question, group inquiry is directed at answering the group's question. While the individual researcher might have the same question as the group in the sense that both the individual and group want to know the answer to Q, this doesn't mean that whatever the individual does by way of trying to answer the question is part of the group inquiry. If the individual researcher aims at answering the question *for themselves* and not *for the group*, perhaps even aims to actively skirt the responsibilities of group membership by, say, claiming the credit themselves or hiding the information they gain from running their own experiments, this inquiring activity doesn't seem to be *for the group* in the way group membership would require. This individual would not be acting as a group member. See also Gilbert [2023: 190].

¹⁵ See Gilbert [2023: ch. 6].

or manager prevents its being a plural subject. The conditional commitments of the lab directors and lower level researchers have different content. Lower level researchers commit to following the instructions of those above them and supporting them in their research in exchange for compensation, while the directors commit to setting the research agenda, taking on the management of the research group, and compensating their researchers. The directors and lower level researchers each have duties to the other, and none can unilaterally decide to simply ignore them without being subject to some censure.

5 Defending the conservative approach

In this section, I'll show that the explanation of group inquiry offered above does not succumb to Habgood-Coote's objections. The first such objection is that Gilbertian group action cannot explain cases of large hierarchical group action, because it requires that the relevant intention must stem from the agreement of all members. Habgood-Coote argues:

It might well be possible for large groups to be characterised by certain 'thin' joint commitments (such as the commitment to obey a set of social norms), but this does not establish that all large-scale groups have the rich commitments required by joint action on the plural subject account. [Habgood-Coote 2022: fn 15]

While Gilbert's theory is perhaps most easily exemplified in small democratic cases, it works just as well for large or hierarchical ones and explicitly does not require "rich" commitments. In fact, attending to hierarchical structures is essential for understanding how a Gilbertian view makes sense of cases like the large research group. If it were the case that the only group commitment which could explain the group's action or the formation of the relevant plural subject was a commitment like "I commit to inquire into question Q, given suitable commitments from others" then Habgood-Coote's objection would present a serious problem. It is highly unlikely that all members of a large research group would make, or have made, such a commitment, and yet it is clear large groups do inquire.

A more plausible approach is to understand each member of the group as making a non-basic commitment to do what the group requires, as dictated by a certain subset of the group authorized to direct the group. Under these circumstances, the members have *de facto* made a commitment to inquire into the question Q. The content of this commitment changes depending on one's position. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy commit taking instructions from others, having minimal say in group policy, and doing the grunt work,

in exchange for, say, financial compensation. Those at the top have the power to direct the course of research for the entire group, in exchange for giving up some aspects of the day-to-day practice of science and taking on the responsibility of compensating the group. Everyone in between may commit to taking on the labor of translating a general program of research into specific instructions for those at the bottom, in exchange for somewhat greater financial compensation and prestige. A general commitment to work as a group member can be realized in the specific form of inquiring into question Q given suitable direction from those operative members at the top of the hierarchy.¹⁶ None of this is to say that a commitment on the part of each individual to inquire into some specific question Q *couldn't* lead to the formation of the relevant plural subject. It's just that no such specific commitment is required.

Of course, even if some plural subjects might form by committing to a general project that instantiates itself in different ways at different times, it isn't clear that *all* plural subjects need be formed this way. An example of this might be a physics research project that produces a paper with 5,154 authors (Khachatryan *et al.* [2015]). It is almost certainly not the case that 5,154 authors formed a plural subject by coming together and achieving unanimous agreement as to their research question. Most of these researchers almost certainly never met (or even knew the names of) more than a handful of others. It is likely that a great many only had a detailed understanding of their very small part. And, yet, they seem to constitute a group of the right sort. They produced a paper as a group.

The hierarchical structure of the groups involved enables a straightforward explanation of how 5,154 researchers can be said to inquire together. Presumably, the researchers involved are not several thousand independent researchers who started with their own projects and came together to form an entirely new research group, but members of existing smaller groups.¹⁷ Those who are in charge of directing the research of these smaller

¹⁶ For another, perhaps more straightforward example, consider an American football team. This is surely a large and hierarchically ordered group, yet we don't seem to have trouble making sense of this group because of its hierarchy. The head coach is in charge of the overall plan, the mid level staff, team captains, and quarterbacks work to translate this into a specific set of instructions, and the players enact the game plan. This doesn't require that each person involved re-commit in some democratic way to the group for each new decision. Rather, a more general commitment is made by all to work as a part of a certain team, and this general commitment is enacted in different ways at different times as dictated by the circumstances in which the team acts.

¹⁷ The paper in question was a collaboration between two (admittedly very large) research groups. Each of

groups can come together to engage in a unified research project by agreeing amongst themselves to collaborate, and then issuing the appropriate instructions to their underlings (e.g. to share data, to run experiments). In short, the exchange of commitments required to form a large plural subject is only perplexing if one assumes that this process must be some sort of unanimous democratic process. Commitments to hierarchically structured groups are insufficient to explain large groups only if one over-interprets the richness of the commitments required to form a group.

Considering the matter of large groups highlights the importance of having an ontology of groups. Without this, it isn't clear which phenomena need to be explained by a theory of group inquiry. It may be that Habgood-Coote is correct that once a collection of people reaches a certain size, standard views of group action cannot account for their actions. Without a view on the ontology of groups, though, it is unclear whether failing to provide an account for such a large group actually counts against standard views of group action. As I've shown, at least some standard approaches to group action can account for the inquiries of *very* large groups. Suppose, though, that some collection of people is so large and disjoint that these standard approaches can't explain what it is for such groups to inquire.¹⁸ I confess I have trouble thinking of something that is both intuitively a group

these groups, however, presumably has its own norms which govern joining and leaving the group, which set out the standards for acting as a member of the group, and which determine who gets individual credit for having worked on some particular aspect of a group project. This raises questions larger than I can tackle here, including questions about whether group membership is transitive (i.e. if S is a member of Group A, and Group A is a member of Group B, is S a member of Group B as well?). I suspect that Gilbert's views can, with judicious application of the non-basic joint commitment, explain either case, though the details would vary on a case by case basis. I would further suggest that we *don't* find it intuitively hard to understand the functions of extremely large groups as long as we attend to their internal structure. For example, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China has just shy of 3,000 legislators and it seems perfectly reasonable to think and speak of the National People's Congress as doing things (e.g. passing laws, forming committees, debating legislation) as a group. The idea of 3,000 people spontaneously coming together to legislate as a group and forming by the exchange of 3,000 individual intentions to act as a member of the group is certainly farfetched. However, the process of forming such a group by having duly elected individuals sign the appropriate paperwork, agree to abide by certain extant organizational structures, and take the appropriate oath of office doesn't seem strange at all. They are a group because they have shared their intentions to legislate given certain commitments from others, and each individual has expressed this intention via employment paperwork and an oath of office.

¹⁸ I don't claim to know of an instance of such an inquiry, or of an intuitive counterexample to my view. My gut reaction is that any group inquiry worthy of the name will be done by a group at least robust enough

and so large and disjoint that it can't be accounted for by one of the standard views, especially since Gilbert's view allows for *very* thin commitments to constitute a group. A counterexample would have to be a group so disjointed that it wasn't even characterized by extremely thin or conditional commitments. As I have discussed above and will further discuss below, the non-basic joint commitment allows for extremely elaborate and complex group structures, even for cases where members are not aware of who constitutes the entire group. Since the Gilbertian view offers a positive account of what a group is, the onus would seem to be on those who reject this view to explain why what they're describing *really is* a group. Defenders of massively large disjoint group inquiries must offer a reason that these inquiries really are *group* inquiries if such inquiries are to be taken seriously as counterexamples to standard accounts of group action. Insisting that such inquiries really are group inquiries is of little value in the absence of an ontology of groups that supports such a view.¹⁹

Habgood-Coote's second objection concerns the difficulty of accounting for division of labor using standard approaches to group action.²⁰ However, the view of group inquiry

to be explainable as a group in a way consistent with one of the standard theories.

¹⁹ Some, including Bird [2014: 50] hold that collections of people such as "anthropologists" constitute groups that are "a much larger collection of people, whose boundary is not clear and which is not organized". According to Gilbert's view, "all anthropologists" might constitute a reasonably easily demarcated chunk of the population but would not constitute a plural subject, being too disjoint and lacking even non-basic joint commitments that would bind them together as a group. So, if Bird is right, then these collections of people might be the large disjoint groups which could inquire and thus provide a counterexample to my view. Completely adjudicating this dispute falls outside the scope of this paper. While I would acknowledge the existence of *very* large groups (e.g. all practicing Catholics may constitute a group in the millions structured by a set of non-basic commitments committed to believe the doctrine established by a hierarchy of operative members of the group with the Pope at the top, the college of cardinals, the bishops, priests and deacons, and so on) following Gilbert, I am most inclined to say that, lacking the right kind of joint commitments "anthropologists" just do not constitute a group, they do not act or believe jointly as a group, and Bird acknowledges this as a possible interpretation of his view ([2014: 50]). As noted in footnote 3, the goal is not a wholesale defense of Gilbert's view, but an argument that it *can* handle the case of very large group inquiries.

²⁰ It is important to be clear about which sense of "division of labor" is relevant to the problem of defining group inquiry. One question about division of labor is 'what is the most epistemically useful way to divide labor'. Some variation of this question is often what philosophers of science consider when proposing different ways in which scientists might pursue research agendas (see e.g. Kitcher [1990], Muldoon and Weisberg [2009], Thoma [2015]). This is not the question relevant to defining group inquiry. How a group

I've sketched, with non-basic joint commitments, shows that it is possible to explain the division of labor with these tools. Consider the laboratory example. The researchers constitute a plural subject because they have bound themselves together in the appropriate way. One or a few members of the plural subject may have a high degree of unilateral say in how research (and therefore the activity of the group as a whole) goes, and the rest are committed following the instructions of those who direct the research. In the laboratory example, a research question might be set by the director or lead researchers in their role as the operative or appropriately authorized members of a non-basic joint commitment, who then work with their immediate subordinates to develop a broad strategy for answering the question. They divide the question into parts for which different portions of the lab will be responsible. Those at the top are charged with informing their subordinates of the question, and with working alongside their subordinates to develop a plan for how they will tackle their share of the problem. Once there is a rough plan, the appropriate small groups or individuals may work to complete their assigned part, and deliver the fruits of their labors to those above them, who take on the work of integrating results of each sub-project into a single cohesive position which the plural subject may take with regards to its question.²¹

So, the labor is divided amongst the parts of the plural subject according to the internal hierarchy of the plural subject. As was the case with the previous objection, division of labor within a large group is only difficult to account for if one is committed to seeing the Gilbertian view as one on which plural subjects must be comprised of individuals on equal footing in all ways, or as requiring some sort of egalitarian democratic structure. The task of putting many individuals on equal footing in developing and answering a question is daunting, but that just shows that democracy writ large or hierarchy-less view of group action is probably not how large group inquiries generally work. Hierarchy is not a problem that compounds the extant issue of explaining the actions of large groups. Rather, we find insight into large group inquiries when we see how hierarchical commitments and the

inquires well is a different, and downstream, question from what group inquiry is. The relevant question is, instead, 'how can labor be divided while ensuring that the resulting actions are 1) still the actions of the group and 2) explained by the same theory of group action'. Gilbertian group action answers this latter question.

²¹ This is just an example of how the interconnected commitments and the binding of the will which form the core of a Gilbertian plural subject allow for the division of labor. The details would change depending on the structure of the group in question.

complexity of a group are part of what makes a large group capable of group inquiry.

One might argue that Gilbert's view is inadequate as a basis for group inquiry because, according to Lackey [2020], her view cannot distinguish between group belief and group lies.²² According to Lackey, a lie is the following:

A lies to B if and only if (1) A states that p to B, (2) A believes that p is false, and (3) A intends to be deceptive to B with respect to whether p in stating that p. [Lackey 2020: 28]

So a group lie is this, but scaled up. A group lies if they state that p, have a group belief that p is false, and intend to be deceptive with respect to p. Lackey holds that Gilbert's joint acceptance account of group belief cannot distinguish between group lies and group belief: a group can jointly accept something about which it intends to be deceptive in just the same way it can something it genuinely believes. Gilbert [2023: ch. 6] offers a solution to this. According to her view, a group can form a collective belief, and then a collective intention to be deceptive with respect to that belief. It seems clear that the group is lying just when there is a group belief that not-p and an intention to state as a group that p. If the worry is that in following through with the intention to state that not-p the group seems to both believe and not believe that p, Gilbert [2023: 194] allows that it is possible for a group to agree to have an official position that it takes that need not be its actual belief (and that, indeed, this is exactly what the concept of the official position is for: those times when an agent states something that it may not actually believe).²³

Jessica Brown [2024: 115–6] following Habgood-Coote [2019] argues that Gilbert's view is unable to deal with cases where groups are so large or fragmented that members “may not understand, never mind intend, the overall project to which they contribute”. Brown's prime example is the Manhattan Project, wherein:

[A] large group of people were involved in enriching uranium, without even knowing what they were doing, let alone who the other participants were. Nonetheless, in virtue of the different members doing their bit, the overall group enriched uranium even if its members didn't intend to do just that. In general, although accounts of joint agency fit well with

²² As well as group bullshit. I'll focus here on group lies as the primary case, because the way Gilbert's view accounts for each is similar.

²³ Gilbert notes here as well that Lackey seems to make use of the concept of the “official position” in a similar way.

cooperative activities which involve small numbers of agents, they don't seem suited to instances of group action which involve many agents and exhibit a division of labour within a hierarchical structure. [2024: 116]

As we've seen, non-basic joint commitments easily explain complex hierarchical structures and the structure of large groups. They can also explain things like the Manhattan Project in terms of Gilbertian joint action, even though many of the people involved never knew (or knew of) each other or intended anything akin to 'I intend to work to enrich uranium given that others so intend' in conditions of common knowledge.²⁴ With non-basic joint commitments establishing a hierarchy, there's no need for every Manhattan Project worker to be jointly committed to each other in some kind of democratic way. Instead, for example, individuals might commit to work for a specific lab led by a specific supervisor, the authorized or operative member of the joint agent. That supervisor might be part of a non-basic joint commitment binding them to pass on the results of their work to someone higher up, and so on. Numerous discrete laboratories might be so structured, along with the different military and intelligence agencies involved. As long as the lower-level individuals are committed to doing what their superiors say in virtue of the non-basic joint commitments, and the hierarchical structure caps off with a most-superior individual or joint agent that has the authority in virtue of a non-basic joint commitment to direct those under them and to establish the overall aims and goals of the group, and the agent (plural or otherwise) at the top has the intention to enrich uranium, then everyone involved in the Manhattan Project can constitute a group in the Gilbertian sense, even if they don't know of every other agent, or even what they're ultimately aiming at.

In short, Gilbertian joint commitment structures can account for immensely large and complex groups, even in cases like those raised by Brown. In fact, the Manhattan Project seems like such an expansive and elaborately structured group inquiry, the individuals involved had such different intentions and goals, and often worked in conditions of anonymity with respect to other that one might reasonably have the intuition that it is difficult to explain the sense in which *everyone* involved in the Manhattan Project constitutes a single group agent, even if they intuitively do. To back up this intuition, one needs an account of what a group is that has the tools to capture this complexity. Gilbert's social ontology is one such account. I do not go so far as to claim that it is the only account that

²⁴ And surely this is not what happened, given the emphasis on secrecy and the sheer size of the program.

can do so, but it is certainly up to the task.

6 Conclusion

I've defended the standard approaches to group action and belief against Habgood-Coote's charge that they are not sufficient to account for large group inquiries. In particular, I've shown that Margaret Gilbert's account of group action can explain both large inquiries and those which require the division of labor. The aim has not been to defend my approach as the sole acceptable account of group inquiry, but to provide an argument that a certain kind of explanation of group inquiry, namely one that takes a standard view of group action as one of its starting points, can succeed. The goal is to show that Gilbert's view, and similar ones, remain serious contenders in the space of social ontology and epistemology, even when tasked with explaining new and complex phenomena, not that no other view can succeed. It is important to offer an active defense of the standard views, rather than leaving this task implicit or assuming these views as a default, because Habgood-Coote's objection is the sort that, were it to succeed, could completely overturn many of the basic tools in not only social philosophy, but the social sciences as well. While Habgood-Coote's objection is not successful in this instance, his background motivation is, at its core, absolutely right. It would be a massive flaw for any approach to group action and belief that it could not account for an entirely commonplace group action like group inquiry.²⁵

Nicholas Smith
Alabama A&M University
Department of Social Sciences
New School of Business
4900 Meridian St. N
snicholas.smith1@aamu.edu

²⁵ The number of people the author would like to thank for support of various forms while writing this paper is far too many to comprehensively list here. Of particular note are the following: Rachel Cooper, Matt Dean, Kevin Diep, Reginald Gardner Jr., Jaako Hiervela, Charles Leitz, Shannah Linker, Stella Moon, Michele Palmira, Savannah Pearlman, Casey Perin, Dylan Popowicz, Duncan Pritchard, Brandon Richardson, Karl Schafer, Aaron Styza, Darby Vickers, Jonas Weaver, Elise Woodard, Felege-Selam Yirga.

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