Trustworthy Groups and Organisations

Katherine Hawley, University of St Andrews, kjh5@st-and.ac.uk, December 2014

1. Significance of the topic

- Public discourse around trust/trustworthiness often focuses on groups, organisations, etc.
- Ditto in other academic disciplines, e.g. 'organizational trust' in management studies.
- Groups as a test case for philosophers' individual-oriented accounts of trust(worthiness), including my own commitment-based account.
- Considering trust(worthiness) can enrich existing philosophical discussion of group intentionality, belief, knowledge, agency, responsibility, etc, helping connect belief and action in group contexts; groups of scientists, corporations as central cases.
- Practical importance of generating, joining, maintaining trustworthy groups.

2. What are Groups?

Philosophers' examples: the Ford Motor Corporation; the crowd that had assembled on the square; Rita, Bob, and Sue; committees; news teams; governments; research groups; Greenpeace, the Catholic Church, the medical profession, Gen X, financial markets, corporations, states – 'clearly groups, not individuals.' (List and Pettit *Group Agency* p.1).

Philosophers recognise differences (sometimes ontological differences) amongst various kinds of groups, but use 'group' as a general term for any collective entity which is *prima facie* a candidate for agency, belief, responsibility, etc.

Social scientists distinguish 'groups', 'organisations', 'institutions'; an institution is something like a 'a complex of positions, roles, norms and values' (via 'Social Institutions' in the *SEP*). I will use 'group', but we should beware misunderstandings.

3. Trustworthiness and Reliability for Individuals

Philosophers of trust distinguish *merely relying* from *trusting*: I rely on my alarm clock to wake me up, or I trust my husband to wake me up before he leaves for work (although in everyday contexts we often use 'trust' for what philosophers call 'reliance'.

- trust, unlike reliance, is connected to betrayal, resentment, other reactive attitudes;
- trustworthiness, unlike reliability, is plausibly a virtue;
- inanimate objects (probably animals, perhaps young kids) can be reliable or unreliable, but neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy;
- adults are merely reliable-or-unreliable in some respects, trustworthy-or-untrustworthy in other respects: perhaps I rely on my husband to wake me because he bangs the door when he leaves.

So philosophers of trust try to complete the following:
When A trusts B to φ, A relies on B to φ…
…(out of goodwill towards A) or
…(because B recognises A's needs in this respect) or
…(because B has adopted A's interests in B's φ-ing) or
…(because B has made a commitment to φ)

My question: do we need the concept of group trustworthiness as well as group reliability?
Do we need to trust-or-distrust groups as well as merely relying upon them (or not)?

4. Group Trustworthiness and Group Reliability in Testimony

An individual can be a reliable (or unreliable) source of information through her behaviour, including verbal behaviour (e.g. speaking in sleep). But this isn't trustworthiness: I am not untrustworthy just because my emotions do not show easily on my face.

When an individual makes an assertion, however, she undertakes responsibility for what she says, and this becomes a matter of trustworthiness.

Two key ways for groups to 'speak': via an authorised spokesperson, or an approved report. A group can be a reliable source of information via its behaviour, including its 'speaking'. But can a group also be a trustworthy or untrustworthy testifier? Can a group assert, take responsibility for what's said?

Lackey (2014) argues that the group's testimony just is the spokesperson's testimony, and its significance should be assessed in terms of the spokesperson's epistemic situation. But that's not helpful here: the spokesperson is not asserting in her own right, not taking responsibility. So we should not think of the group's trustworthiness as the spokesperson's trustworthiness.

Instead, let's ask what, if anything, would be lost if we only thought of group (un)reliability, rather than group (un)trustworthiness.

- **Can we gain knowledge from group 'testimony' without group trustworthiness?**

Tollefsen (2007) outlines a 'reductionist' account of learning from group testimony which treats it as evidence, and does not require a rich notion of trustworthiness.

But some (Moran 2006) think that *assurance* is what gives individual testimony its epistemic value, which suggests we need group assurance (and thus trustworthiness) if we are to learn from group testimony. E.g. Tollefsen (2009) writes '…the fact that groups issue intelligible statements either in writing or via a spokesperson seems to me now not sufficient to say that they, themselves, are testifiers' (12), because group testifier must offer assurance, and 'acknowledge epistemic responsibility'. Fricker (2012) also emphasises assurance, and suggests 'we construe a group testifier as constituted, at least in part, by way of a joint commitment to trustworthiness as to whether *p*' (271-2).

However, Fricker accepts that we can learn from testimony even when we don't receive assurance (e.g. when we're over-hearing). And Moran's arguments for the epistemic importance of assurance are less persuasive for groups. So my answer here is **no**.

- **Do we need group (un)trustworthiness as an element of our moral practices?**

It is common to have 'interpersonal' reactive attitudes towards groups: to feel resentment, gratitude, loyalty etc. Fricker mentions the 'ethical special flavour inherent in….good informing', and Lackey (forthcoming) argues that we must allow space for 'group lies', a conceptual gap between what a group believes and what it says. She thinks this is important for two reasons: we refer to groups (e.g. tobacco companies) as lying, and it's important to be able to hold them morally responsible for lying.

(I will take it that the capacity to lie goes with the capacity to assert, and thus to be evaluated for trustworthiness or untrustworthiness, not merely reliability.)

Caveat: I am not sure what to say about legal responsibility of groups (e.g. corporations), either how it in fact works, or the ways in which practice is justified.

Can we instead make sense of these moral practices in terms of trustworthy-or-untrustworthy *individuals* working together (well or badly) to make the *group* as a whole reliable-or-unreliable as a source of information?

This does not mean that the group's statement is the statement of any individual, or that any individual is assessed as trustworthy-or-untrustworthy as a producer of that statement. No individual needs to take responsibility for the truth of the statement. However, each may take responsibility for her part in the system: designing it, operating it, monitoring it, etc.

Our reactive attitudes can sensibly be directed at the individuals in the group even if we don't know who they are; e.g. we can resent the people in the tobacco company who allow it to put out false information, just as you can resent the person shouting in the street at midnight even if you don't know who that is.

So here again my tentative answer is **no**, we do not need to use the notion of group trustworthiness as opposed to group reliability.

5. Group Trustworthiness and Group Reliability in Action
First, we must understand what it is for a group to *act* – mere behaviour isn't a sensible target of either trust or distrust. Then we must understand what further conditions must be satisfied for a group's actions to show that it is trustworthy: goodwill, recognition of need, commitment-meeting, or mutual interest? Different philosophical accounts of individual trust make different demands on groups, some more plausible than others.

Interim suggestion: as with group testimony, investigate ways in which we can interact with groups and their members without requiring us to trust or distrust the group itself.

6. Individual Trustworthiness in a Group Context
(Perceived) correlations between individual trustworthiness and group membership may be explained in a variety of ways:
- some intrinsic feature shared by group members;
- interactions amongst group members, including mutual sanctions/rewards;
- entry conditions to the group.

These explanations may focus on sincerity and/or on competence of the individual group members; as ever, it's important to ask 'trusted by whom to do what?'

Conceptually, we can distinguish the trustworthiness of the group from the trustworthiness of group members. But in practice we encounter individuals as members, leaders, or representatives of groups. It can be indeterminate whether our (dis)trust targets the individual, the group, or both. Perhaps sometimes we *rely* on an individual because we *trust* the group, or *rely* on the group because we *trust* the members.

Trust between group members (and distrust of non-members) may help determine the structure, capacities and functioning of the group. Perhaps some within-group trust is a prerequisite for the group as a whole becoming the kind of structured entity which itself can be trustworthy-or-untrustworthy rather than merely reliable-or-unreliable.

If we do give up on group trustworthiness, in favour of individual trustworthiness directed towards group reliability, this raises interesting issues about the scope of an individual's responsibility in group contexts – e.g. regarding whistle-blowing.

7. Afterthought – What about Group Trust?
Can a group trust or distrust, either another group or an individual? (This doesn't immediately follow from whether groups can be trustworthy-or-untrustworthy.)

The question of group trust may be answered differently by different (individual-oriented) accounts of trust.
- Associating trust with an affective attitude, indeed a feeling, makes it harder to attribute trust to groups – even if groups can have beliefs, we may want to resist the step towards group feelings (where this is more than just a shorthand for a quantified or generic claim about the feelings of group members).
- Similar issues may arise from the association of trust with the possibility of betrayal, and reactive attitudes such as resentment, depending on how these are understood. Can a state, corporation, or committee be resentful, grateful, etc?
- Interest-based accounts may handle group trust better: a group G may predict A's behaviour based on 'beliefs' about the A's interests in taking G's interests into account.

But: do we really have to allow for genuine, normative group trust, as opposed to reliance? We can tackle this question by thinking about how/whether individuals may have obligations to groups (not merely to their members): should we be trustworthy to groups? If we can live without that notion, then perhaps we can live without normative group trust.

References:
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