

TESTIMONIAL KNOWLEDGE

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Testimony is responsible, either directly or indirectly, for much of what we know, not only about the world around us but also about who we are. Despite its relative historical neglect, recent work in epistemology has seen a growing recognition of the importance and scope of testimonial knowledge. Most of this work has focused on two central questions, which will be the main topics of this article. First, is testimonial knowledge necessarily acquired through transmission from speaker to hearer, or can testimony generate epistemic features in its own right? Second, is justified dependence on testimony fundamentally basic, or is it ultimately reducible to other epistemic sources, such as perception, memory, and reason?

Testimony itself is typically understood quite broadly so as to include a variety of acts of communication that are intended or taken to convey information—such as statements, nods, pointings, and so on. (For a full development of this view, see Lackey 2008.) Knowledge that is distinctively testimonial requires belief that is based or grounded in, not merely caused by, an instance of testimony. For instance, suppose that I sing “I have a soprano voice” in a soprano voice and you come to believe this entirely on the basis of hearing my soprano voice. (This is a variation of an example found in Audi 1997.) While my testimony is certainly causally relevant to the formation of your belief, the resulting knowledge is based on your hearing my soprano voice rather than on what I testified to, thereby rendering it perceptual in nature. What is of import for distinctively testimonial knowledge is that a given belief be formed *on the basis of the content of a speaker’s testimony*. This prevents beliefs that are formed entirely on the basis of features *about a speaker’s testimony* from qualifying as instances of *testimonial* knowledge.

1. TESTIMONIAL KNOWLEDGE: TRANSMISSION VERSUS GENERATION

Much work in the epistemology of testimony centers around the view that knowledge is *transmitted* from speaker to hearer. There are two main theses to this Transmission View (TV) of testimony; one is a necessity claim and the other is a sufficiency claim. In particular:

TV-N: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that p on the basis of A's testimony that p only if A knows that p . (See the references for a list of proponents of different versions of this thesis.)

TV-S: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, if (1) A knows that p , (2) B comes to believe that p on the basis of the content of A's testimony that p , and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that p , then B knows that p . (See the references for a list of proponents of different versions of this thesis.)

The Transmission View is often supported by a purported analogy between testimony and memory. While memory is said to only preserve knowledge from one time to another, testimony is thought to merely transmit knowledge from one person to another. Thus, neither is a generative epistemic source. For instance, just as I cannot now know that p on the basis of memory unless I non-memorially knew that p at an earlier time, the thought underlying the TV-N is that I cannot know that p on the basis of your testimony unless you know that p . Similarly, just as my knowing that p at an earlier time is sufficient, in the absence of current undefeated defeaters, for me to now know that p on the basis of memory, the TV-S holds that your knowing that p is sufficient, in the absence of undefeated defeaters, for me to know that p on the basis of your testimony.

Now, there are two kinds of defeaters that are standardly taken to be relevant to the satisfaction of condition (3) in TV-S. First, there are what we might call *psychological defeaters*. A psychological defeater is a doubt or belief that is had by S, which indicates that S's belief that p is

either false or unreliably formed or sustained. Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being *had* by S, regardless of their truth-value or epistemic status. (For various views of psychological defeaters, see BonJour 1980, 1985; Nozick 1981; Pollock 1986; Goldman 1986; Plantinga 1993; Lackey 1999, 2006, 2008; Bergmann 1997, 2004; and Reed 2006.) Suppose, for instance, that Wally believes that the dog next door is a Siberian Husky but then his wife tells him, and he thereby comes to believe, that it is instead an Alaskan Malamute. In such a case, the justification that Wally had for believing that the neighbor's dog is a Siberian Husky has been defeated by the belief, or psychological defeater, that he acquires via the testimony of his wife. Second, there are what we might call *normative defeaters*. A normative defeater is a doubt or belief that S ought to have, which indicates that S's belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained. Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being doubts or beliefs that S *should have* (whether or not S does have them) given the presence of certain available evidence. (For various views of normative defeaters, see BonJour 1980, 1985; Goldman 1986; Fricker 1987, 1994; Chisholm 1989; Burge 1993, 1997; McDowell 1994; Audi 1997, 1998; Williams 1999; Lackey 1999, 2006, 2008; BonJour and Sosa 2003; Hawthorne 2004; and Reed 2006.) For example, suppose that in the case above, Wally fails to believe his wife when she tells him that the dog next door is an Alaskan Malamute, though he has no good epistemic reason for doing so. Here Wally should believe his wife's testimony, even though he in fact does not, and thus he has a normative defeater for his belief that the dog next door is a Siberian Husky. The thought underlying both psychological and normative defeaters is that certain kinds of doubts and beliefs—either that a subject has or should have—contribute epistemically unacceptable *irrationality* to doxastic systems and, accordingly, defeat the justification possessed by the target beliefs in question.

Moreover, a defeater may itself be either defeated or undefeated. For instance, suppose that after accepting his wife's testimony, Wally consults a handbook on dogs and he discovers that its

smaller size indicates that it is in fact a Siberian Husky, thereby providing him with a *defeater-defeater* for his original belief. And, as should be suspected, defeater-defeaters can be defeated by further doubts and beliefs, which, in turn, can be defeated by further doubts and beliefs, and so on. Similar considerations involving reasons, rather than doubts and beliefs, apply in the case of normative defeaters. When one has a defeater for one's belief that p that is not itself defeated, one has what is called an *undefeated defeater* for one's belief that p . It is the presence of undefeated defeaters, not merely of defeaters, that is incompatible with testimonial justification.

While there is much intuitive support for the Transmission View, there are also objections that have been raised to both of its claims. Against the necessity claim, cases have been presented where a speaker fails to believe, and hence know, a proposition to which she is testifying, but she nevertheless reliably conveys the information in question through her testimony. So, for instance, suppose that a devout creationist who does not believe in the truth of evolutionary theory nonetheless researches the topic extensively and on this basis constructs extremely reliable lecture notes from which she teaches her 3rd grade students. In such a case, the teacher seems able to reliably teach to her students that *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*, thereby imparting knowledge to her students that she fails to possess herself. Against the sufficiency claim, cases have been presented where a hearer's belief fails to be an instance of knowledge even though the hearer has no relevant undefeated defeaters, the speaker from whom it was acquired has the knowledge in question, and the speaker testifies sincerely. For instance, suppose that a speaker in fact knows that there was a bald eagle in the park this morning because she saw one there, but she is such that she would have reported to her hearer that there was such an eagle even if there hadn't been one. In such a case, the speaker's belief is an instance of knowledge and yet because she is an unreliable testifier, the belief that the hearer forms on the basis of her testimony is not. Both counterexamples

show that the Transmission View is false. (Both types of cases are developed in more detail in Lackey 2006, 2008.)

One of the central conclusions that these considerations motivate is the replacement of the TV with conditions focusing on the *statements* of speakers rather than on their states of believing or knowing. More precisely, the TV may be replaced with the following *Statement View* of testimony (SV):

SV: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that p on the basis of A's testimony that p only if (1) A's statement that p is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, (2) B comes to truly believe that p on the basis of the content of A's statement that p , and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that p . (For a detailed defense of the SV, see Lackey 2006, 2008.)

Further conditions may be needed for a complete view of testimonial knowledge. But regardless of what is added to the SV, such a view avoids the problems afflicting the TV. For instance, despite the fact that the devout creationist in the above case does not possess the knowledge in question, her statement that *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus* is reliably connected with the truth via the extensive research that she did on evolutionary theory. So, though she fails the TV-N, she satisfies condition (1) of the SV, thereby enabling her students to acquire the knowledge in question.

Conversely, despite the fact that the speaker in the second case above knows that there was a bald eagle in the park this morning, her statement that this is so is not reliably connected with the truth since she would have reported that there was such an eagle even if there hadn't been one. Thus, the hearer cannot acquire knowledge about the bald eagle on the basis of the speaker's testimony. The SV can, therefore, handle both types of counterexamples with ease.

Moreover, the SV reveals that testimony is not merely a transmissive epistemic source, as the TV assumes, but that it can instead generate epistemic features in its own right. In particular,

hearers can acquire testimonial knowledge from speakers who do not possess the knowledge in question themselves. In this respect, then, testimony is on an epistemic par with sources traditionally considered more basic, such as sense perception and reason.

2. TESTIMONIAL JUSTIFICATION

Another question at the center of work in the epistemology of testimony is how precisely hearers acquire justified beliefs from the testimony of speakers, where justification is here understood as being necessary and, when added to true belief, close to sufficient for knowledge. Traditionally, answers to this question have fallen into one of two camps: *non-reductionism* or *reductionism*. According to non-reductionists—whose historical roots are typically traced to the work of Thomas Reid—testimony is a *basic* source of justification, on an epistemic par with sense perception, memory, inference, and the like. Given this, non-reductionists maintain that, so as long as there are no undefeated defeaters of either the psychological or the normative variety, hearers can be justified in accepting what they are told *merely* on the basis of the testimony of speakers. (See the references for proponents of various versions of non-reductionism.)

In contrast to non-reductionism, reductionists—whose historical roots are standardly traced to the work of David Hume—maintain that, in addition to the absence of undefeated defeaters, hearers must also possess *non-testimonally based positive reasons* in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers. These reasons are typically the result of induction: for instance, hearers observe a general conformity between reports and the corresponding facts and, with the assistance of memory and reason, they inductively infer that certain speakers, contexts, or types of reports are reliable sources of information. In this way, the justification of testimony is *reduced* to the justification for sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. (See the references for proponents of different versions of reductionism.) Broadly speaking, there are two different

versions of reductionism. According to *global reductionism*, the justification of *testimony as a source of belief* reduces to the justification for sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. Thus, in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers, hearers must possess non-testimonially based positive reasons for believing that *testimony in general is reliable*. According to local reductionism, which is the more widely accepted of the two versions, the justification for *each instance of testimony* reduces to the justification for instances of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. So, in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers, hearers must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting *the particular report in question*.

Objections have been raised to both non-reductionism and reductionism. The central problem raised against non-reductionism is that it is said to permit gullibility, epistemic irrationality, and intellectual irresponsibility. (See, for instance, Fricker 1987, 1994, 1995; Faulkner 2000, 2002; and Lackey 2008.) In particular, since hearers can acquire testimonially justified beliefs in the complete absence of any relevant positive reasons on such a view, randomly selected speakers, arbitrarily chosen postings on the internet, and unidentified telemarketers can be trusted, so long as there is no negative evidence against such sources. Yet surely, the opponent of non-reductionism claims, accepting testimony in these kinds of cases is paradigmatic of gullibility, epistemic irrationality, and irresponsibility.

Against reductionism, it is frequently argued that young children clearly acquire a great deal of knowledge from their parents and teachers and yet it is said to be doubtful that they possess—or even could possess—non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting much of what they are told. (See, for instance, Audi 1997. For a response to this objection, see Lackey 2005, 2008.) For instance, an 18-month-old baby may come to know that the stove is hot from the testimony of her mother, but it is unclear whether she has the cognitive sophistication to have reasons for believing her mother to be a reliable source of information, let alone for believing that testimony is generally

reliable. Given this, reductionists—of both the global and the local variety—may have difficulty explaining how such young subjects could acquire all of the testimonial knowledge they at least seem to possess.

There are also objections raised that are specific to each kind of reductionism. Against the global version, it is argued that in order to have non-testimonially based positive reasons that testimony is generally reliable, one would have to be exposed to a wide-ranging sample of reports. But, it is argued, most of us have been exposed only to a very limited range of reports from speakers in our native language in a handful of communities in our native country. This limited sample of reports provides only a fraction of what would be required to legitimately conclude that testimony is *generally* reliable. Moreover, with respect to many reports, such as those involving complex scientific, economic, or mathematical theories, most of us simply lack the conceptual machinery needed to properly check the reports against the facts. Global reductionism, then, is said to ultimately lead to skepticism about testimonial knowledge, at least for most epistemic agents.

Against the local version of reductionism, it is argued that most ordinary cognitive agents do not seem to have enough information to possess relevant positive reasons in all of those cases where testimonial knowledge appears present. For instance, it is argued that most cognitive agents frequently acquire testimonial knowledge from speakers about whom they know very little. (See, for instance, Webb 1993; Foley 1994; Strawson 1994; and Schmitt 1999. For a response to this objection, see Lackey 2008.) For instance, upon arriving in Chicago for the first time, I may receive accurate directions to Navy Pier from the first passerby I see. Most agree that such a transaction can result in my acquiring testimonial knowledge of Navy Pier's whereabouts, despite the fact that my positive reasons for accepting the directions in question—if indeed I possess any—are scanty at best.

The direction that some recent work on testimony has taken is to avoid the problems afflicting non-reductionism and reductionism by developing qualified or hybrid versions of either of these views. (See, for instance, Fricker 1995, 2006*b*; Faulkner 2000; Goldberg 2006, 2008; Lehrer 2006; and Pritchard forthcoming.) For instance, in an effort to avoid the charges of gullibility and epistemic irresponsibility, some non-reductionists emphasize that hearers must be “epistemically entitled” to rely on the testimony of speakers or that they need to “monitor” incoming reports, even though such requirements do not quite amount to the full-blown need for non-testimonially based positive reasons embraced by reductionists. (See Goldberg 2006, 2008, respectively, for these qualifications to a non-reductionist view.) And some reductionists, trying to account for the testimonial knowledge of both young children and those hearers who possess very little information about their relevant speakers, argue that positive reasons are not needed during either the “developmental phase” of a person’s life—when a subject is acquiring concepts and learning the language, relying in large part on her parents and teachers to guide the formation of her belief system—or when hearers are confronted with “mundane testimony”—about, for instance, a speaker’s name, what she had for breakfast, the time of day, and so on. (See Fricker 1995 for these modifications to reductionism.) On this version of reductionism, then, while positive reasons remain a condition of testimonial justification, such a requirement applies only to hearers in the “mature phase” of their life who are encountering “non-mundane testimony.” Such qualified or hybrid versions of both non-reductionism and reductionism often encounter either variations of the very same problems that led to their development, or altogether new objections. (See, for instance, Insole 2000; Weiner 2003; and Lackey 2008.)

Arguably, a more promising strategy for solving the problems afflicting non-reductionism and reductionism should, first, include a necessary condition requiring non-testimonially grounded positive reasons for testimonial justification. This avoids the charges of gullibility, epistemic

irrationality, and intellectual irresponsibility facing the non-reductionist's view. Second, the demands of such a condition should be weakened so that merely some positive reasons, even about the type of speaker, or the kind of report, or the sort of context of utterance, are required. This avoids the objections facing the reductionist's position that young children cannot satisfy such a requirement and that beliefs formed on the basis of the testimony of those about whom we know very little cannot be justified. Third, additional conditions should be added for a complete account of testimonial justification, such as the need for the reliability of the speaker's statement found in the SV. This frees the positive reasons requirement from shouldering all of the justificatory burden for testimonial beliefs, thereby enabling the weakening of its content discussed above. (For a detailed development of this strategy, see Lackey 2008.)

There is, however, an alternative family of views that has been growing in popularity in recent work in the epistemology of testimony, one that provides a radically different answer to the question of how testimonial beliefs are justified. Though there are some points of disagreement among some of the members of this family, they are united in their commitment to at least three central theses. First, and perhaps most important, the *interpersonal relationship* between the two parties in a testimonial exchange should be a central focus of the epistemology of testimony. Second, and closely related, certain features of this interpersonal relationship—such as the speaker *offering her assurance* to the hearer that her testimony is true, or the speaker *inviting the hearer to trust* her—are (at least sometimes) actually *responsible for conferring epistemic value* on the testimonial beliefs acquired. Third, the epistemic justification provided by these features of a testimonial exchange is *non-evidential* in nature. Let us call the general conception of testimony characterized by these theses the *Interpersonal View of Testimony*, or the IVT. (Proponents of the IVT include Ross 1986; Hinchman 2005; Moran 2006; and Faulkner 2007.)

One of the central motivations for the IVT is a perceived failure on the part of existing views of testimony—particularly those that regard a speaker’s testimony that *p* merely as *evidence* for a hearer to believe that *p*—to adequately account for the import of the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the hearer in a testimonial exchange. In particular it is argued that a significant aspect of true communication is missing when a speaker is treated as a mere truth gauge, offering nothing more than words. In contrast, proponents of the IVT argue that speakers should be regarded as agents who enter into interpersonal relationships with their hearers. For instance, according to Richard Moran’s version of the IVT, a speaker’s testimony that *p* is understood as the speaker giving her *assurance* that *p* is true. Since assurance can be given only when it is freely presented as such, Moran claims that a speaker freely assumes responsibility for the truth of *p* when she asserts that *p*, thereby providing the hearer with an *additional* reason to believe that *p*, different in kind from anything given by evidence alone.

A central objection facing proponents of the IVT is that the interpersonal features that lie at the heart of their views are not clearly epistemologically relevant. For instance, the mere fact that a speaker offers her assurance to a hearer does not affect the reliability, proper functioning, truth-tracking, evidential relations, or any other relevant truth-conducive feature of the testimony in question. Given this, a speaker can give assurance—and thereby a justified belief—even when she shouldn’t be able to, say, because she is a radically unreliable testifier. In an attempt to avoid this sort of problem, some proponents of the IVT add to their view conditions that are distinctively epistemic, such as requiring the reliability of the speaker’s testimony or the absence of defeaters on the part of the hearer. (See, for instance, Hinchman 2005.) The problem with this move is that all of the justificatory work is done by the addition of these new conditions, leaving the interpersonal features epistemologically superfluous. This leads to the following dilemma: either the IVT is genuinely interpersonal but epistemologically impotent, or it is not epistemologically impotent but

neither is it genuinely interpersonal. (See Lackey 2008 for this objection to the IVT.) Either way, the IVT fails to provide a compelling alternative to existing theories in the epistemology of testimony.

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