

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

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Spoken and written testimony pervades much of our life. I hear the announcement that the train is delayed, I read that Philip Roth has published another novel, and one's partner can tell you that she loves you. A good deal of our knowledge would appear to be testimonial knowledge – perhaps most. Curiously, though, until fairly recently philosophers did not often concern themselves with this way of acquiring knowledge, and it was thought that one should be suspicious of beliefs acquired in this way. To know something one must be able to reason it through for oneself, or perceive it oneself, and not just acquire it second-hand from someone else. Here is Locke expressing this “individualist” approach to knowledge.

I hope it will not be thought arrogance to say, that perhaps we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative knowledge if we sought it in the fountain, in the consideration of things themselves, and made use rather of our own thoughts than other men's to find it: for, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes as to know by other men's understanding...The floating of other men's opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was science is in us but opiniatrey.”
(1689, book 1, p. 58)

However, such an approach is at odds with the intuitive claim that much of what we know is acquired simply on the say-so of somebody else. Surely I can come to know that *Exit Ghost* has just been published by reading the advertising blurb; I do not have to go and see it for myself in

the bookshop. And surely Catherine can know that Jim loves her just in virtue of his telling her so. Beliefs acquired via testimony may be second-hand – they are beliefs that have been passed on to you by someone else – but they are not second rate, and they may on occasion amount to knowledge. The realisation that this is the case has led to testimony becoming one of the major research focuses in contemporary epistemology. Tony Coady's (1973) book, *Testimony*, kick-started discussion and work has continued apace ever since. The *Journal of Social Epistemology* and the recently launched *Episteme* are devoted to testimony and related issues, and most of the major journals regularly carry papers on the topic.

Some of the most important issues relevant to the epistemology of testimony are discussed in the papers collected here. A key question concerns whether testimonial knowledge is inferential or non-inferential. Inferentialists argue that for a testimonial belief to amount to knowledge it must be justified, and such justification must consist in a supporting inference that is available to the hearer. When I hear the station announcement I may immediately acquire the belief that the train is late; nothing else – no inference or accompanying thoughts – may run through my head, but for this belief to be justified, and for it to constitute knowledge, I must *be able to* articulate some kind of supporting inference. This may involve premises concerning the reliability of announcements at stations: such announcements have usually been correct in the past and so are likely to be so this time. Here inductive inference would provide justification for my testimonial belief and thus enable me to have testimonial knowledge. Non-inferentialists, however, argue that one can have testimonial knowledge without being able to work through such an inference, or, if one does have the ability to reason thus, such an ability does not play a justificatory role. Certain kinds of reliabilist, for example, argue that one can have testimonial knowledge simply in virtue of acquiring a true belief from a reliable testifier, a reliable testifier being one whose testimony is usually correct.

This inferentialism/non-inferentialism debate is related to the question of whether or not testimony is a basic (or fundamental) source of knowledge. A basic source of knowledge is one whose epistemic credentials do not rely on another (more basic) form of knowledge. Perception is such a basic source. We acquire perceptual knowledge simply in virtue of our perceptual engagement with the world; no other

faculties are required. Inferentialists, however, argue that testimonial knowledge is not basic in this sense. The justification that testimonial beliefs may possess is derived from perceptual, memorial and inferential resources. Some non-inferentialists deny this claim. Testimony may causally depend on perception – I must, for example, hear what you say – and on memory: I must remember the meaning of your words and perhaps who you are (I would not believe just anybody). There need not, however, be any epistemic dependence here: the justification possessed by testimonial beliefs is not derived from these other sources; I can acquire justified beliefs or knowledge from you simply in virtue of hearing your testimony.

Since inferentialists see testimonial justification as derived from more basic forms of justification, they are said to have reductive accounts of testimony, and those who claim that testimony is a basic source of knowledge are said to have non-reductive accounts. Duncan Pritchard, in the first paper of this special issue, proposes an account of testimony that respects both reductionist and non-reductionist intuitions. He calls his view “quasi-reductionism”. Building on his recent work (2005), Pritchard continues to deliver a deeper understanding of epistemic luck by highlighting the distinction between intervening luck (that involved in Gettier cases) and environmental luck (that involved in Fake Barn County¹). Both kinds of luck are incompatible with knowledge and thus, Pritchard claims, a safety condition is required in order to have knowledge. A belief is safe if it could not easily have been false. However, a demon could make sure that the world is always set up so as that my beliefs are true and safe; the demon will make sure that my hip flask is full when I believe that it is. But such a belief would not suffice for knowledge since my cognitive abilities are not properly involved in its acquisition. True beliefs are imposed on me by the demon, whereas for knowledge I must to some extent be responsible for my epistemic success. Knowledge therefore requires both a safety condition and an ability condition to be satisfied.

Such an account is in accord with certain reductionist claims: one cannot acquire knowledge from a speaker if one does not have any information regarding whether they are likely to be reliable. In order to

¹ See Goldman (1967).

acquire testimonial knowledge it may not be required that one has evidence that the particular speaker in question is reliable, but one needs at least some background information that provides reason to think that this kind of person usually tells the truth, or that this is the kind of situation where true testimony is usually spoken. If one blindly trusts a speaker, then one is not properly exercising one's cognitive abilities and one cannot therefore acquire knowledge in this way.

In other cases, however, reductionism is rejected and fundamentalist (or what Pritchard calls "credulist") intuitions are accepted. Some of the epistemic support one has for one's testimonial beliefs need not be reducible to that provided by perception and memory. I may have the ability to detect when someone is lying and this can aid my acquisition of testimonial knowledge; this ability, though, can be partly grounded in my acceptance of the testimony of others, in others telling me not to trust that person (and partly perhaps by perceptual evidence one has of their shiftiness). Quasi-reductionism is thus reductionist in spirit – testimonial knowledge cannot be possessed where there is no non-testimonial epistemic support for one's beliefs – but it is compatible with certain fundamentalist intuitions in that some epistemic support can be provided by testimonial evidence.

Reductive, inferential accounts see testimony as providing evidence in support of one's testimonial beliefs. Just as one has inductive evidence in support of one's empirical beliefs, one can also have inductive testimonial evidence in support of a speaker's testimony: evidence that a speaker has been reliable in the past provides one with good reason to believe his present testimony. Sanford Goldberg, however, argues that testimony should not be seen as providing evidence in this way. The epistemic support for one's testimonial beliefs does not only depend on the reasons one has for believing a testifier or for thinking his testimony reliable (one's "personal reasons"); it also depends on the epistemic quality of the speaker's testimony, whether or not the hearer is aware of this. I may believe that both Alex and Arsen are reliable testifiers, and this belief may provide epistemic support for the testimonial beliefs I acquire from them concerning how to prepare, respectively, risotto and gnocchi. Unbeknownst to me, however, Alex has trained for years with a top Italian chef whereas Arsen picked up his culinary skills from casual viewing of daytime TV. Alex's culinary beliefs have more justification and so therefore his testimony concerning

such matters confers more justification onto the beliefs that I acquire from him. I have more epistemic support for my beliefs concerning the preparation of risotto than for those concerning gnocchi even though from my perspective Alex and Arsen are likely to be as reliable as each other.

Goldberg's account is externalist since the epistemic support for one's testimonial beliefs need not be accessible to the hearer. I may never come to know about Alex's training, yet this training provides my testimonial beliefs with epistemic support that cannot be provided by Arsen's testimony. Internalists, however, argue that epistemic support or justification must be available to the hearer. I need not consciously reflect on such justification, or go through the reasoning that supports my testimonial beliefs, but I must be able to do so. In my contribution to this issue, I call this kind of internalism "hearer-internalism" since it is required that the receiver of testimony is aware of reasons in support of a speaker's beliefs. I argue, though, for a distinct kind of internalism – speaker-internalism – one that involves the speaker's awareness of how the hearer is likely to think. This kind of internalist condition is relevant in cases of "engineered knowledge" where a speaker deviously manipulates a hearer into acquiring certain beliefs, the acquisition of such beliefs depending both on the hearer's prejudices and, I claim, on the speaker's knowledge of those prejudices.

One aspect of non-inferentialist accounts is that since we are not required to plug knowledge of the past reliability of the speaker into a justifying inference, we are, in many cases, justified in accepting a speaker's testimony a priori, that is, blind trust is warranted. Tyler Burge (1993) argues for such a position. His "Acceptance Principle" allows that we are a priori justified in believing what a speaker says because it is reasonable to assume (unless there is evidence to the contrary) that a speaker – the testimony of whom we understand – is rational, and further, that the testimony of a rational speaker is true. Here, Elizabeth Fricker argues that Burge's account is both wrong, and wrong-headed. He is wrong because we are not warranted in assuming that the testimony of rational speakers is true: it is sometimes rational to lie, and rational speakers can always have false beliefs. His account is wrong-headed since in any actual situation we are "swamped" with empirical evidence concerning the likely truthfulness of speakers' utterances and this will

always sideline the significance of any alleged a priori warrant we may have.

Robert Audi in his paper also turns to the question of whether testimony is an a priori, fundamental source of knowledge, but he does so by moving the focus away from justification and onto rationality, and by talking of the acceptance of testimony rather than belief. Acceptance, or what he calls presumptive acceptance, is a weaker cognitive attitude than belief – it requires less commitment – yet it can still guide action. I may accept the plumber's word that my central heating needs replacing and thus go ahead with the refit even though I'm not entirely sure I believe him; I haven't the time to get another quote and winter is just around the corner. Audi argues that it is rational to accept a speaker's testimony given that there is no obvious reason not to believe that person's word, even in the absence of the kind of evidence inferentialists cite.

Testimony is usually seen as akin to memory in that it preserves knowledge that was acquired first-hand by other means, by perception or a priori reasoning. Testimony cannot generate knowledge; it merely passes it from one person to another. This is what Peter Graham calls the orthodox view. He refutes this view by describing a case where children acquire knowledge from their teacher even though the teacher does not himself believe the claim he makes; he does not therefore know what the children come to know. In the second half of his paper Graham then goes on to explain how testimony can generate knowledge even though it usually only plays a preservative role. Speakers are a source of information; this, it is claimed, is because there are lawlike connections between what people say and the state of the world. *Ceteris paribus* I only say that the "coffee is cold" when the coffee is cold. Information transfer is therefore usually accompanied by knowledge transfer: I know that the coffee is cold and you can come to know this too by hearing what I say. Sometimes, however, our words can carry information even though we do not believe what we say (and thus do not have knowledge to pass on). If this is so – and I will leave it to Graham to present the relevant examples – then on acquiring information from a speaker, a hearer can come to have knowledge since his beliefs are based on (correct) information about the world even though the speaker cannot be said to have such knowledge since he does not believe the information he passes on.

In this issue there is some cutting edge work on the epistemology of testimony and I must thank the contributors for their time and effort. I must also thank all at *Philosophica* and particularly Steffen Ducheyne for agreeing with me that the epistemology of testimony is deserving of one of their special issues. I hope you agree that there is much of interest here.

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