

**TESTIMONY AS AN A PRIORI BASIS OF ACCEPTANCE:
PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibility that testimony is an a priori source, even if not a basic source, of rational support for certain kinds of cognitions, particularly for a kind of acceptance that it is natural to call *presumption*. The inquiry is conducted in the light of two important distinctions and the relation between them. One distinction is between belief and acceptance, the other between justification and rationality. Cognitive acceptance is also distinguished from behavioral acceptance, and their normative status is shown to be governed by quite different principles. A major focus in the paper is the question of how the epistemic authority of testimony for cognitive acceptance of its content may depend on normative elements implicit in the kind of language learning and social coordination that are normal for at least the majority of human beings.

The importance of testimony in the development of human knowledge is clear. But there remains disagreement about its epistemic significance, particularly concerning its ability to confer non-inferential justification or the status of non-inferential knowledge on testimony-based beliefs. I have argued that it can do both, but is nonetheless not on a par with such basic sources of justification and knowledge as perception and reflection.¹ A source need not be basic, however, to be a priori, and a

¹ For critical discussion of the epistemic status of testimony in comparison with basic sources of knowledge and justification (with references to related literature) see my (2006). For related discussion of the status of memory, see Senor (2007), defending a preservationist view of memory, and Lackey (2007) defending the view that memory is a generative source of knowledge and justification (her paper is a rejoinder to his, which in turn is a response to an earlier paper of hers). Neither paper addresses my view, defended in, e.g., (1997), that memory is

case can be made that testimony is an a priori source of justified beliefs.² My project here is to leave that possibility open and pursue the epistemology of testimony, and particularly its potential to be an a priori source of *some* cognitions, in the light of two important distinctions and the relation between them. One distinction is between belief and acceptance, the other between justification and rationality. The literature on testimony has not in general taken account of these two distinctions, and I must begin with some essential background and, in that light, indicate the significance of each.

1. Testimony as a Non-inferential Source of Cognition

In normal cases in which we come to believe what others tell us – their *testimony*, in a wide sense of the term – the testimony-based beliefs we form are non-inferential. We believe p on the basis of being told that p , not on the basis of *beliefs* about the testimony or the attester, say that the person speaking is credible. We need not even have such beliefs, though we may be disposed to form them if the truth or reliability of the attestation comes into question. The point is important because, on any plausible epistemology, if testimony-based beliefs are inferential, their epistemic status will depend in part on that of the “premise” belief(s), and assessing their status will be correspondingly affected. (All of this can be applied, with certain qualifications, to written testimonial statements by others, but this paper will be addressed to the status of cognitions based on oral testimony.)

Framing the question of inferentiality in relation to beliefs is natural and not inappropriate. But there is a difference between belief and acceptance, though the two terms may in some contexts be used interchangeably, and both attitudes can be either inferential or non-inferential.³ Let me begin by distinguishing three cases of non-doxastic acceptance.

generative with respect to justification but not knowledge.

² For discussion of what constitutes an a priori source and an assessment of the case for testimony’s being one, see Audi (2005).

³ Belief and acceptance are compared and contrasted at length in Audi (1999), though that paper does not single out presumptive acceptance.

What I call *behavioral acceptance* is roughly accepting p in the sense of forming an intention to use it for certain purposes. Behavioral acceptance does not entail believing p , but the absence of *disbelief* is typical of cases in which we accept a proposition for some purpose, and it is presupposed in most ascriptions of such acceptance. An important instance of behavioral acceptance is accepting a proposition for the sake of argument, for instance where our intention is to find out what follows from it or can be said for it. Although behavioral acceptance does not entail believing the accepted proposition, it does entail forming a practical propositional attitude: intention. I do not consider intention-formation to be an action, at least not in every case; but it is an event and, in virtue of being directed toward action, may be viewed as broadly behavioral. The acceptance behavior *may* constitute action, as where the acceptance is an element in *resolving* to use p for certain purposes; but, phenomenally, behavioral acceptance of p may just blend into our response to someone's telling us that p .

Cognitive acceptance, by contrast, is attitudinal rather than behavioral. Some cases are instances of belief (a dispositional "property"), others of belief-formation (an occurrence). In both of these cases, acceptance is doxastic. But some cases of cognitive acceptance exemplify a weaker propositional attitude that I propose to call *presumptive acceptance* or, for short, *presumption*. Suppose Ryan gives you a plausible but less than cogent account of why he missed a meeting. You may neither believe nor disbelieve his main point (that he received a misdated communication in a now deleted e-mail); yet if what he says "seems plausible" (as we often say), you may also not have suspended judgment or (on the positive side) formed the intention to do anything on the basis of the point.

More positively, this kind of acceptance (presumption) is something like giving the attester the benefit of the doubt; but, unlike the legal notion of the presumption of innocence, it is cognitive rather than normative. My notion applies to cognitive attitudes rather than normative standards.⁴ It is like believing and other cognitive attitudes in implying a

⁴ The presumption of innocence can be granted to an accused person by someone who has no belief as to guilt, as well as by people who believe the person guilty (or innocent). Such a presumption is something like a starting point for legal argument. Another legal notion concerns presumptions – say that a person knew that marijuana was growing in the person's backyard – as propositions properly

tendency to use p in guiding one's behavior. In the case of Ryan, for instance, in presuming the truth of what he says you will, in many matters, tend to proceed as if you believed his main point. You would, for example, tend to regard him as having a sense of responsibility and to expect him to be at the next meeting. Yet you would not be disposed to say that you believe he had a misdated e-mail if asked (in a way that does not change your cognitive inclinations in the direction of belief), but rather something like 'I suppose so'; and you would tend not to draw inferences from p as you normally would from what you believe. You would tend, for instance, not to infer that someone sent a misdated e-mail, though if the question whether this happened arose, you might consider this likely and believe the weaker proposition that it is probable. You would also tend to want independent evidence for certain propositions that presuppose the truth, as opposed to the moderate likelihood, of his story, say that he is a good candidate to chair the next meeting. You could of course want this evidence anyway, for instance where chairing the meeting is important. The point is that there is a significant difference between the way beliefs function in guiding behavior and cognition and the less extensive way in which presumptions do so.

Presumptions, then, in a psychological as opposed to normative sense, are weaker than beliefs, but provide much the same kind of guidance of expectations and behavior. They are weaker in some weighted combination of such factors as (1) degree of conviction that p , (2) tendency to draw inferences from it (and to form beliefs or propositions one takes to be entailed or probabilistically implied by it), (3) willingness to reconsider it, (4) tendency to ascribe high probability to it, and (5) disposition to move to suspended judgment, or even disbelief, in the light of apparent counterevidence. In many cases of testimony, however, this does not make presumption an inappropriate response to the attestation in question. For much testimony we receive, there is no *need* to form beliefs as distinct from presumptions. Moreover, people differ in their cognitive make-up. For some people, such as those who are constitutionally cautious or of a skeptical cast of mind,

taken to be known (or perhaps believed) by the person. Neither kind of presumption is in question here. For detailed discussion of presumption, including legal aspects of it, see Ullmann-Margalit (1983).

acceptance as presumption may be as common as belief. For others, belief may be more common; and a given person may move from credulity in one situation, or in listening to one attester, to skepticism in other cases. My overall point here is that the theory of testimony should take account of the varying cognitive attitudes possible in response to what people tell us and that belief is not required for every case in which testimony is properly said to be *accepted*. Testimony can often play its crucial social role in communication and guidance even without cognitive attitudes as strong as belief.

It may appear that presumption is simply weak belief. There are good reasons to deny this. Some philosophers (especially Bayesians) draw the contrast between weak and strong beliefs in terms of probability ascriptions to the proposition in question (p). The first thing to note here is that not every belief is to the effect that p has a certain degree of probability. Children become believers before they even have a concept of probability. For people who do have one, there are many propositions simply believed: I believe that there is print before me, but I have ascribed no probability to this proposition – certainly not before considering the question of its probability. I am *disposed* to ascribe a very high probability here, but such a disposition need not be realized in all our beliefs.⁵ This point calls to mind a second. There is a non-technical sense in which every belief may be plausibly thought to have a particular strength (at a given time). Strength in this sense seems roughly proportional to some weighted combination of (1)-(5) above and may be broadly conceived as chiefly resistance to elimination, say to being overcome by counterargument or by denial coming from a credible person. In *this* sense, a presumption, like a hope – or a belief weak in the probability-ascribing sense – may be strong. I deny, then, that presumption reduces to weak belief in either sense. If there is a sense of “weak belief” that (1) we may use without being misleading and (2) is equivalent to presumption, one might prefer that term to “presumption”. Doing so would not undermine the substantive results of this paper; but in my view, re-expressing my position using that terminology would be at best misleading: “belief” is already used in ways that obscure

⁵ That there is a distinction between dispositional beliefs and dispositions to believe, and that the former are not as frequently possessed as many philosophers have thought is argued in detail in Audi (1994).

important distinctions among kinds of propositional attitudes, and outside certain technical contexts “weak belief” is likely to evoke the wrong concept.

Non-inferentiality also needs further comment here. It should be stressed that the case for the non-inferentiality of testimony-based cognition is no weaker for presumption than for belief. The caution or other factors leading to the attitude of acceptance rather than to belief need not operate through inference or reasoning (a point argued in Audi 1997).⁶ A certain kind of critical person may receive much testimony with a cautious attitude that usually favors presumption over belief. The convictionally weakest cases – those in which the cognition is held with the lowest degree of conviction compatible with acceptance – might be a kind of supposition; the convictionally strongest cases that are short of belief are better considered a presumptual acceptance that will strengthen, often imperceptibly to the subject, into belief with the kind of confirmation the future often brings.

2. Undefeated Testimony and its Rational Acceptance

Since our interest is in testimony as a normatively positive source, we should note certain kinds of cases in which it does not confer justification or any other positive epistemic status. Call this (normatively) *defeated testimony*. A full account of what can defeat testimony – in the sense of preventing it from conferring positive epistemic status on cognition based on it – would require much space, but for our purposes it is sufficient to say this. *Undefeated* testimony is the kind that occurs in the absence of at least the following common and probably most characteristic defeaters: (1) internal inconsistency in what is affirmed, as where an attester gives conflicting dates for an event; (2) confused formulation, a kind that will puzzle the recipient and tend to

⁶ For critical discussion of the idea that testimony-based beliefs are non-inferential see Rysieu (*forthcoming*). He argues that something like inference is typical in interpreting testimony, though he grants that this interpretive role of inference or of other processes does not entail that when a testimony-based belief that *p* is formed *given* an interpretation, it is epistemically dependent on a premise or *p* itself is inferred from the relevant interpretive proposition(s) or information.

produce doubt about whether the attester is rightly interpreted or even has a definite belief to communicate; (3) the appearance of prevarication, common where people appear to be lying, evading, or obfuscating; (4) conflict with apparent facts evident in the situation in which the testimony is given, as where a person shoveling earth over smoking coals says there has been no campfire; and (5) conflict with what the recipient knows, justifiably believes, or is justified in believing (has justification for believing). These conditions may occur separately or together; the more of them an attestation satisfies, the more clearly defeated it is, other things equal.

(1)-(3) might be called *internal defeaters*, (4)-(5) *external defeaters*, since they are factors external to the testimony. Defeaters should be distinguished from what are more naturally called *obstacles to conviction*, such as beliefs or other dispositions of the recipient that prevent acceptance. These may block acceptance even of unassailable testimony. Defeaters may or may not be such obstacles. My concern is normal testimony, the typical undefeated kinds in which we say things to our children and friends, answer routine questions, and express our desires in making everyday purchases.

Defeaters of testimony can prevent a testimony-based cognition – whether a belief or a presumption (or some other cognitive kind) – from being a case of knowledge or justification. They can also prevent its being even rational. If an acquaintance tells me a story that is clearly internally inconsistent, I should not accept it (as a whole). If I do, my acceptance is neither justified nor even rational. I am taking rationality to be a weaker normative status than justification (as I have argued it is, in 2001, chs. 1 and 2). This is not to deny that the grounds of the rationality of a cognition imply its having some degree of justification; but they do not imply *justification simpliciter*. Let me elaborate.

One way to see the relevant difference between rationality and justification is to think of the former in contrast with irrationality and the latter in contrast with being unjustified.⁷ Unjustified beliefs are commonly far from irrational, though they may be irrational. Another

⁷ For a case that rationality (in actions and propositional attitudes) is to be understood as equivalent to the absence of irrationality see Gert (1998); he says, e.g., that a belief is rational if not irrational, where “a belief is irrational if and only if it is held in the face of overwhelming evidence or logical truths that are, or should be, known to the person holding it” (p. 34).

way to see the difference is to consider justification, as commonly understood – *justification simpliciter*, in my terminology. Such justification is sufficient for knowledge in the case of true beliefs not subject to the kinds of defeaters prominently brought out in literature dealing with Gettier cases and with other cases showing that justified true beliefs need not constitute knowledge. These cases include at least defeat by merely accidental connections between the fact that *p* and the person's believing it, the presence of relevant alternatives in which *p* is false, and lottery cases (which may be a special case of defeat by relevant alternatives). The latter suggestion may be controversial, but there does seem to be *one* ordinary notion of justification of which it holds. Very commonly, if someone justifiedly believes a true proposition, this belief constitutes knowledge. By contrast, philosophers have rarely even been tempted to hold that rational true belief is sufficient for knowledge, nor is this plausible.

Whether or not we countenance a notion of justification simpliciter, clearly a person can be unjustified in holding something, say on the basis of a certain kind of clever but invalid argument, without being irrational in holding it; and apparently a cognition, whether a case of belief, acceptance, or surmise, can be rational without being justified. Think of first-blush impressions of a person or initial interpretations of a poem. Where one has something to go on, rationality is often easily reached. Justification (simpliciter) requires more. Another way to see this is to note that in such cases as the two just offered, one can be rational in having either of two possible competing interpretations, but justification (simpliciter) for one would rule out justification for the other. (The former point is not clearly true for the cases where one ascribes a probability of $\frac{1}{2}$ to each interpretation, since then one should suspend judgment; but no such probability ascription is entailed by all such cases.) Rationality is not, however, so weak a normative status as to be insignificant. A rational attitude is, intellectually speaking, minimally respectable. Its rationality invalidates certain kinds of criticism. It does not, of course, make all requests for grounds, reasons, justification, or the like inappropriate. But even a high degree of justification does not do that.

3. Normative Principles of Testimony-Based Acceptance

Once it is seen that rationality is a weaker normative status than justification, it is natural to raise the question what principles govern testimony-based rational cognition. Given the project of this paper, I will consider mainly cognition weaker than belief, especially presumptive acceptance – *presumption*, for short. I will take it as uncontroversial that if presumptive acceptance is psychologically weaker than belief, then whatever the degree of normative support for the former, it confers a higher degree of positive epistemic status than it would on belief. Compare what seems a quite parallel case: hope as contrasted with belief. Very little evidence for p is needed to make it rational to hope that p . We can even rationally hope that p when we justifiedly believe p is highly improbable. Neither point applies to justification for believing, or even for presuming, that p .

In the light of these points, I want to frame some normative principles concerning the capacity of testimony to confer rationality on an attitude its recipient forms on the basis of it. Consider the kind of case suggested by my focus so far:

P1 *The testimonial acceptance principle*: Presumption that p formed on the basis of undefeated testimony that p is thereby rational.

To assess this, it is useful to compare it with a counterpart for justification. A case can be made that for testimony-based beliefs, some degree of justification for trusting testimony in general is required if they are to receive justification from testimony.⁸ This implies that both a strong testimonial reductionism and a strong testimonial autonomy thesis are mistaken: testimony does not justify as does a basic source (as will be argued below), but testimony-based justification is also not reducible to some other kind, such as inductive justification for believing p given the track record of the attester.

The counterpart requirement for knowledge does not hold for testimony-based knowledge: children can acquire that even before they have knowledge of the track record of the attesters in question and before they are eligible for assessment as justified or unjustified (this point is

⁸ Elizabeth Fricker would require this even for knowledge. See, e.g., her (2006).

briefly defended in my 1997).⁹ The point will be unacceptable to many who consider knowledge to entail justification; but if (like me) one views knowledge from an externalist perspective and justification from an internalist perspective, there may be several kinds of case in which one acquires testimony-based knowledge that *p* without having justification for *p*. Consider the kind already suggested: the tiny (pre-critical) child just learning a language and forming beliefs comes to know that there is milk in its glass because mama says so, pointing to it; but at this stage the notion of justification does not apply. (Granted, it is false that the child is *unjustified* in believing this; but that mere negative point holds even for inanimate objects.)

Consider, too, a case in which friends convince me, using apparently good arguments, that *A* is unreliable. Even if their arguments are plausible and I view them as good (though *A* is not in fact unreliable), I might believe *A*'s earnest and credible testimony that *A* will help with a clean-up project. It seems possible that where *A* is both sincere and knows the proposition attested to, and where it is expressed in a way that seems to bespeak conviction, I may know it on the basis of *A*'s testimony despite being puzzled that I continue to accept it and in spite of no longer being justified (simpliciter) in believing it. Note that I might come to doubt *A*'s reliability in general, without doubting that *A* is significantly unreliable *in this case* (even though I should). Nor would I have the higher-order beliefs that *A* knows that *p* or that I do. Granted, I would here have *some* justification for believing *p*; the point (regarding this second case) is that there can be knowledge without the degree of justification that warrants ascribing to the recipient being justified simpliciter, in the usual sense in which that implies knowing that *p* (given the truth of *p* in the absence of certain special conditions).¹⁰

⁹ For further discussion of how very young children – “pre-critical” children, we might say – acquire knowledge through testimony, see Goldberg (*forthcoming*) and Greco (*forthcoming*); the latter is in part a constructive critique of the former.

¹⁰ I here include lottery cases as loosely meeting a Gettier condition; they are in any case an exception to my suggestion about justification simpliciter. Even if one thinks there is some probability high enough so that someone who will lose a fair lottery knows this truth, one will surely agree that there is a point at which one is strongly justified in believing, but does not know, that one's ticket will lose.

I am leaving open whether a testimony-based belief can constitute knowledge even if *S* has no justification *at all* for it. The following might seem to be an instance. Suppose that *S* comes to know that *p* in a completely normal case of testimony from a highly credible person who knows it, but *S* then forgets the testimony and simply continues to believe *p* from memory. This might be an ordinary case of remembering that *p* and thereby knowing it. We can now imagine that again *S* is given plausible arguments against *p*, and it seems possible that *S* reaches a point at which justification for believing *p* is entirely eliminated. If, by a kind of fortunate entrenchment of *S*'s belief that *p*, *S* continues to hold it, I do not see that this cannot be a case of knowledge.¹¹ The belief is not, however, based on testimony at the time it is both without justification and constitutes knowledge. It is instead *memory-based*, and that status allows many different ways of *coming* to know a proposition which is later known simply in virtue of one's remembering it. We might say that the knowledge in question in the case at hand is – like much of our knowledge – *historically* testimony-based. That would distinguish it from other kinds of beliefs representing knowledge that *p* by virtue of the subject's remembering that *p*. But it would not show that a genuine testimony-based belief can constitute knowledge without the recipient's having any justification whatever for *p*.

These cases support the view that knowledge does not entail justification, but they do not disconfirm the view that normally people who live in good communication with others *have* a significant degree of justification for taking undefeated testimony to be credible (where credibility is roughly a matter of both sincerity and competence regarding the topic of *p*). To say that such justification is normally possessed, however, is not to say that it is necessary for testimony-based belief to be justified. One way to see its apparent necessity is to imagine someone created as an adult with a normal mastery of a natural language and the kind of natural credulity Thomas Reid posits as an element in our nature. Consider the first moment in which the person believes testimony (where this is also before the person can acquire inductive evidence supporting it). There is perhaps no difficulty in seeing how the testimony-based beliefs, if produced from knowledge on the attester's part, could be

¹¹ Supporting considerations are given for the related case of memory in my (1995).

knowledge in the recipient. But suppose we do not assume that knowledge entails justification. Then it seems that, in order to be *justified* in believing *p*, the recipient needs some experience with the “track record” of testimony (or some other ground of justification). This does not entail that testimony-based justification is reducible to some other kind, only that its acquisition requires some other source as a basis of a justificatory foothold. To see that such a foothold is needed, consider whether, in our case of the person created as an adult and accepting testimony for the first time, we would accept “He told me” as providing *prima facie* justification here. We should not and probably would not. These points do not apply to the formation of perceptual beliefs, though even in those cases we need not suppose that any simple epistemological story will suffice.¹²

It seems to me that parallel points apply to the case of testimony-based presumption, with the important difference that less is required for justification. On my view, less still is required for rationality, and I now want to consider some normative principles in which presumption and rationality, rather than (as is more common in epistemology) belief and justification, are central.

4. Grounds of Testimony-Based Acceptance

We might begin by formulating a principle that is like P1 except in incorporating the condition that it is rational for *S* to accept undefeated testimony as credible:

P2 *The rational acceptance principle for testimony*: Presumption that *p* formed on the basis of undefeated testimony that *p*, and in a person for whom it is rational to take undefeated testimony to be by and large credible, is thereby rational.

¹² One question here is how readily such a person would trust perception in a way that goes with formation of perceptual beliefs. This *might* be implicit in a conceptual mastery of “observation concepts”. But that is not obvious. Still, once such a person does form beliefs *on the basis of perception*, they would seem to be non-inferentially justified apart from the need to observe a track-record (a need that would in any case be fulfillable only by relying on both perception and memory).

Rational (presumptive) acceptance, then, requires that the recipient be rational in accepting undefeated testimony as credible by and large (roughly, taking it to be credible in most cases), but P2 does not require a *belief* that undefeated testimony is credible, nor any attitude in which the concept of undefeated testimony occurs. The rationality here is a matter of having grounds, normally from previous experience, supporting the credibility of testimony to the (very modest) degree required for rational acceptance.

P2 is more demanding than P1 but is easily satisfied by normal speakers of a natural language who live in even a loose community with others. It seems more plausible than P1 as a statement of a sufficient (though perhaps not necessary) condition for rational testimony-based acceptance. Arguably the conditions it specifies are also necessary (though not sufficient) for testimony-based justification as well. Supposing it is true, however, is P2 a priori? The question is important for understanding the status of testimony as providing normative grounds for cognition.

In answering this question, it is crucial not to conflate epistemic principles with similar practical ones. This is particularly easy when acceptance is our focus, since there is a kind of acceptance that is behavioral (as argued, for the case of testimony, in my 2005). Consider, for instance,

P3 *The behavioral acceptance principle for testimony:* An act of accepting *p* on the basis of undefeated testimony that *p*, and in a person for whom it is rational to take such testimony to be by and large credible, is thereby rational.

This is difficult to assess apart from knowing the kind of acceptance in question, say acceptance as a working hypothesis or acceptance simply for the sake of argument. But where an act of acceptance of *p* is in question, there may be neither belief nor cognitive presumption that *p*, and the rationality of the act turns on *S*'s grounds for *doing* the thing in question, say assuming someone's claim for the sake of argument. Some principles in this behavioral acceptance family are good candidates to be a priori. Suppose one needs directions to a place one must find on pain of death, and with that in mind consider

- P4 *The behavioral necessity principle for testimonial acceptance:* If one needs to act and cannot do that without certain information, then in the absence of reasons to doubt testimony that one can see provides such information, (behaviorally) *accepting* that testimony as a basis of action is rational.

This will hold even when one has reason to consider the probability of p so low that one would not be rational in presuming it, as opposed to *hoping* that it is true. If, with no idea whatever where the roads lead, I must turn right or left to avoid a forest fire, and someone says she thinks the left fork is the way out, I had better take it, though I may only hope that it leads me out. P4 is not an epistemic principle, and its plausibility as a practical principle may obscure the stronger grounding conditions to which cognitive acceptance is subject.

There may, however, be another route to arguing for the apriority of some epistemic principles governing testimony. Suppose we relativize to the normal case in which the recipient has learned a natural language from elders in the usual way and retains memorial justification for taking the track record of undefeated testimony to be good. The point here is not that (as some philosophers of language might hold) some minimum proportion of attestations we receive must be true in order for us to learn a natural language. I leave this open. What is more important here – and seems plausible – is that, in order for us to learn a natural language in the normal way we do (from observing our elders), there must be some minimum proportion of attestations (of a sufficiently representative kind) that our experience *confirms* in some way. How, for instance, could we learn what “chair” means if we got disconfirmation when we tried to communicate using the term to designate what was pointed out to us in our learning the term?

If our elders are to teach us common nouns, we must in some sense confirm a significant proportion of their attestations by experiences in which we verify what they say by finding that something named is in a certain place, discovering for ourselves that what they say is true, and so forth. It must also be specified that either we retain a subset of the sufficiently strong grounds for acceptance which these experiences provide for us or we otherwise have adequate grounds for presumptual acceptance. (This is not to suggest that testimony *must* be linguistic –

there might be a way to communicate avowals in some other *symbolic* way. But the points made here will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to that case.) Given considerations like these, we might then find plausible a principle more specific, and perhaps also more demanding, than P2:

P5 *The relativized rational acceptance principle for testimony:* Presumption that *p* is rational if (1) formed on the basis of undefeated testimony that *p* and (2) by a person for whom, to at least the extent implied by learning a natural language in the normal way and retaining the testimony-supporting evidential grounds thereby acquired, it is rational to take undefeated testimony to be by and large credible.

Note that P5 is even more modest than it looks. It does not imply that those who *acquire* testimony-supporting grounds – grounds for taking testimony to be credible, i.e., for *trusting* it, to some degree – must *retain* them; the appeal to retention is simply meant to help in specifying the extent to which it is rational for the recipient to take undefeated testimony to be rational. In addition to defects of memory, there is the possibility of someone's suddenly being surrounded by people whose testimony is defeated day after day. This would undermine the testimony-supporting grounds normally acquired in learning a natural language. P5 also does not specify *how* rational the relevant presumption must be. It cannot be *irrational*; indeed, its grounds are the kind that *can* yield justification. But the principle does not imply that *S*'s presumption that *p* must (in addition to being rational) be justified by the kind of experiences in question.

However plausible P5 or something close to it may be, it may not be an a priori truth. A great deal depends on what is implied in normal language learning from elders or from other persons of any age – the issue does not turn on how old the learner is and the case might work as well for someone who, after twenty vegetative years following birth, wakes to peers who then begin linguistic instruction. One problem is that of generalization from a single linguistic source. A child could certainly learn a language from one person only and never even see anyone else.

A different problem is how to deal with confirmed testimony side by side with disconfirmed testimony. Suppose a child is brought up just by its mother and father, who often contradict one another in teaching the

child, say one calling chairs “chairs” the other correcting this and calling them something else. Is the child failing to get confirmation of testimony or is the case perhaps like that of learning English from one parent and Spanish from the other, where the two compete for the child’s linguistic allegiance? Third and most serious, can a child learn a language by good fortune despite most of the attestations needed for the learning being disconfirmed? Might a child somehow see what words mean even when their users are being insincere, or what people mean even when they are incompetent and commonly wrong? Certainly there is room for enough observation of disparity between attestation and the relevant facts to cast doubt on whether the observant child with a good memory must, in acquiring a natural language in the normal way, also gain a basis for rationally taking testimony to be credible.

These difficulties overlook a subtlety. However mixed the track record of testimony may be in the experience of a child learning a language in the normal way, the child must acquire some capacity to compare what is said with confirmatory or disconfirmatory facts. Even with parents disagreeing about what a chair is called, the child cannot understand any of the referring expressions in question without being able (under favorable conditions) to see whether, when it is used referringly by a parent, the chair is present. This ability will imply an ability to respond to certain defeaters of testimony, say to give up a testimony-based belief when perception clearly disconfirms it.

Similarly, an ability to understand language at all will carry a sensitivity to certain internal defeaters. Understanding others requires rejecting or reinterpreting at least much of what they say that one finds inconsistent. It may be, then, that when we take account of the absence of defeaters and bear in mind that we are speaking only of rational presumption and not of justified or even rational belief, we may take P5 to be *a priori*. This view is more plausible if we allow that a presumption can be very weak, something like a supposition that one takes as a guide only so far as there is no reason to doubt it and nothing at stake of such significance as to call for positive evidence beyond whatever evidence the attestation may provide in the context in which the recipient experiences it.

I find so many complexities here, however, that I also consider it plausible to take P5 and similar principles to be contingent and empirical. Suppose we do. Such principles are still not ordinary generalizations.

They express what might be called *regulatory principles of rational appraisal*. If they are not required for an analysis of epistemic and other normative concepts, they at least summarize important elements of our central ways of appraising the rationality of persons and the normative status of their cognitions. They determine, for instance, when certain kinds of criticisms of testimony-based cognitions are unwarranted. The principles are, then, important; they are partly constitutive of our evaluative practices.

5. Testimony as Contrasted with Memory as Normative Sources

On some views, there are no substantive a priori propositions. But even apart from taking this skeptical position one might think there are no a priori normative sources of cognition. I shall here assume that there are,¹³ and that if so, propositional memory (of the common kind in which there is a memory impression that *p*) is a case in point. This is a good foil for testimony. Like testimony, it is unrestricted as to content and also has propositional objects concerning the past or future or timeless in the way mathematical truths are. Memory is also like testimony in not being generative with respect to knowledge.¹⁴ To be sure, there are important differences between the way memory figures in providing normative support and the way testimony does. Whereas for testimony-based cognition to receive support from the testimony in question, perception of an attestation is necessary, memory can provide normative support even if no other source of justification is operating at the time it does. A memorial sense may justify my believing *p* even if no perception or other supporting element cooperates (the memory may, for instance, be of one's own private mental history). Furthermore, memory is so basic that, without relying on that very faculty, we cannot check on the reliability of

¹³ I defend the existence of substantive a priori propositions and provide an account of them that includes a sketch of a plausible ontology that accommodates them, in Audi (*forthcoming*).

¹⁴ In denying that testimony is generative with respect to knowledge I differ from both Graham (2000) and Lackey (2006). A partial reply to their inventive and challenging cases is provided in my (2006).

even a single memorial deliverance, whereas at least much of what is attested to can be independently checked (a point developed in my 2006).

If the contrasts just drawn between testimony and memory show that memory is a more basic source of normative support, they do not show that it is an a priori source. This is not something that can be made obvious, but there are several considerations that support it. For one thing, we cannot adequately explicate what normative support for cognition, say in the form of justification for it or rationality in holding it, *is* without appeal to the supporting role of memory. To omit memory would be to neglect a major constitutive source of such support – and, for some apparently rational cognitions, the only support. Second, apart from skeptical considerations that might impugn any source of normative support, we cannot properly ask why believing *p* (or, even more so, presumptively accepting *p*) is rational given *S*'s having a clear and steadfast memory impression that *p*. Third, a cognition may be said to be rational *in virtue of* being grounded in a memory impression. None of the parallel points holds for testimony. It is true that, in accordance with P5, one could plausibly argue for the testimonial counterpart of the third point for undefeated testimony that *p* in a person for whom, to at least the extent implied by learning a natural language in the normal way and retaining the relevant evidential grounds thereby acquired, it is *rational* to take such testimony to be by and large credible; but this brings a normative notion into the base clause and presupposes a background of normative grounds, whereas neither point holds for memory.

The point of the contrast drawn here between testimony and memory is not to suggest that testimony is not an a priori normative source, but to indicate that if it is, it is not such in the basic way memory is. P5 may be argued to be a priori and to warrant considering testimony a non-basic a priori normative source: one that, *given* conditions that seem to be commonly satisfied, can confer rationality on at least the kind of cognitive acceptance I have called presumption. It would still be a conditional source, in a way memory and sense experience are not, since its normative power depends on non-testimony-based normative support for taking it to be by and large credible; but this need not diminish its importance for human knowledge. Although testimony is not among the sources one must cite in adequately explicating the concepts of justification (and rationality) for cognitions, it is an essential *de facto*

normative source of both, and it must be cited in explaining how we know what we do.

The epistemic authority of testimony for cognitive acceptance of its content is broadly connected with the closeness of rationality to language learning and social coordination. Such learning, as we know it in human communities, normally implies acquiring grounds for non-inferential rational acceptance of undefeated testimony. I have left open that something like inference to the best explanation may come into acquiring those grounds, but I am not suggesting the reductionist point that an inductive rationale can be provided in every such case of rational testimony-based acceptance. If it is true that we human beings cannot learn a natural language (or any language rich enough to be a vehicle of testimony) without (normally) acquiring the grounds in question, a case may be made that, in the way indicated by P5, undefeated testimony is an a priori, even if not a basic, source of rational acceptance. Even if it is not an a priori source of this kind, however, in life as we know it testimony is essential in our acquisition of knowledge and justified belief. Without it we could not climb the ladder that takes us to the heights from which we can intelligibly raise the kinds of questions pursued here, concerning knowledge, justification, and rationality.¹⁵

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