

Lecture 3 **Testimonial Knowledge, Part II**

1. Review

Last week we acquainted ourselves with the concepts of testimonial justification and knowledge. We also discussed **reductionism** about testimonial justification—the position that the justification that testimony confers on a belief can be reduced to other non-testimonial sources of justification (e.g. induction, causation). We saw that both the global and local variants of reductionism faced challenges. Today, we'll turn to the opposing view: **anti-reductionism**.

2. The Anti-Reductionist Position

As you might expect, the anti-reductionist holds that testimonial justification cannot be wholly reduced to non-testimonial justification. (Note that this does not entail that non-testimonial justification plays no role in the justification that testimony conveys on a belief.)

Broadly, anti-reductionist argue that **trust** is relevant to testimonial justification. The following remarks from Thomas Reid (1764) are often taken to be the precursor to modern anti-reductionist views:

*[I]f credulity were the effect of reasoning and experience, it must grow up and gather strength, in the same proportion as reason and experience do. But, if it is the gift of Nature, it will be strongest in childhood, and limited and restrained by experience; and the most superficial view of human nature shews, that the last is really the case, and not the first. ... **[N]ature intends that our belief should be guided by the authority and reason of others before it can be guided by our own reason.** (From ch.6, sect. 24. My emphasis)*

Here, Reid makes a descriptive argument. He argues that, if it were the case that, as Hume maintained, we came to trust testimony on the basis of induction, then we would trust testimony far less as children, and then grow our trust in testimony as we age and gain experience (of forming true beliefs on the basis of testimony). However, this is not how things in fact are for us. Quite the opposite! As children we trust the testimony of others as a matter of course, and only with time and experience do we come to be less credulous. He compares this to the way that, by default we trust our sense perceptions, and only with time and experience do we come to doubt some of those experiences. So, as a descriptive account of how we justify beliefs via testimony, reductionism fails.

Note that Reid seems also to be making a *normative* claim here. He seems to suggest that it is *rational* for us to have a default trust of testimony. This is because, he argues (elsewhere in the same section), “we couldn’t have language and so couldn’t receive instruction” without it.

Contemporary anti-reductionists draw from Reid’s idea that, in the first instance, we ought to trust testimony. They argue that testimony is a **basic source of justification** in much the same way that perception is. Though, proponents of this broad view differ in how precisely they characterise the kind of trust we ought to have in testimony.

Burge on A Priori Entitlements

Burge (1993) argues that a person is “**entitled** to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him unless there are stronger reasons not to do so” (467). He calls this the **Acceptance Principle**. Burge argues that our entitlement to accept testimony is an “a priori” one, by which he means the following:

A Priori Entitlement/Justification: an entitlement/justification whose “justificational force is in no way constituted or enhanced by reference to or reliance on the specifics of some range of sense experiences or perceptual beliefs” (458).

He distinguishes between entitlement and justification:

Entitlement: epistemic rights or warrants that have positive force in rationally supporting a propositional attitude or cognitive practice, but that need not be understood by or even accessible to the subject. (458)

Justification: epistemic rights or warrants that have positive force in rationally supporting a propositional attitude or cognitive practice, and that are accessible to the subject. (458-9)

So, our entitlement to accept the truth of informants’ assertions is one of which we need not even be aware. On this picture, it simply is the case that we are so entitled. What is more, Burge is careful to clarify that the basis of the Acceptance Principle is not inductive or statistical. He maintains that, “we are rationally entitled to rely on interlocution because we may presume that it has a rational source” (470), and we may presume that it has a rational source as long as the message is intelligible.

Coady's Davidsonian Argument

Coady argues for a similar view insofar as he agrees that we have a default right to accept the testimony of others. In a move that similar in spirit to Reid's, he argues that without such a default, language itself would be impossible. His intention is, ultimately, to show that we can pull ourselves up by our justificatory bootstraps. That is, he wants to argue that "our practice of accepting testimony can be seen to be non-circularly self-supporting" (Lipton, 1998: 21). Coady appeals to the following two Davidsonian claims:

- (1) for the most part, belief is veridical
- (2) "it is an a priori truth that if some community of creatures speaks a language, then not all the assertions they make in their language (over some reasonably lengthy period of time) are false" (Lackey 1995: 409)

From these he concludes that, since it is the case that we *do* use language, it must be the case that testimony is reliable (though not infallibly so).

He then argues that, in virtue of the "coherence and cohesion" of (some of our) testimonial beliefs with beliefs formed by other methods (e.g. perception and memory), we can further corroborate those testimonial beliefs. Though, importantly, it is not the case that this step is necessary for our having been justified in the first place when we formed the testimonial belief (since that justification came from the truth of testimony's general reliability).

3. Objections to Anti-Reductionism

There are, of course, several objections to anti-reductionist accounts of testimonial justification.

Gullibility

According to this objection, we would be far too credulous on the anti-reductionist picture. If I am entitled to form a belief on the sole basis that what has been presented (the testimony) has been presented as true, then this is license to be unacceptably gullible. Here is Fricker (1995) on the objection:

But [...] does not mere logic, plus our common sense knowledge of what kind of act an assertion is, and what other people are like, entail that we should not just believe whatever we are told, without critically assessing the speaker for trustworthiness? We know too much about human nature to want to trust anyone, let alone everyone, uncritically. [...] [W]e know too well how, and how easily, what we are told may fail to be true.

The Case of the Alien Diary

This case is similar to the gullibility objection, but does not turn at all on human nature, or on statistical tendencies of speakers in our community to be deceitful. Here is the case from Lackey (2006: 167):

Sam, an average human being, is taking a walk through the forest one sunny morning and, in the distance, he sees someone drop a book. Although the individual's physical appearance enables Sam to identify her as an alien from another planet, he does not know anything either about this kind of alien or the planet from which she comes. Now, Sam eventually loses sight of the alien, but he is able to recover the book that she dropped. Upon opening it, he immediately notices that it appears to be written in English and looks like what we on Earth would call a diary. Moreover, after reading the first sentence of the book, Sam forms the corresponding belief that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the author's planet. It turns out that the book is a diary, the alien does communicate in English, and it is both true and reliably written in the diary that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the planet in question.

Surely, the objection goes, Sam lacks any reason to accept the assertions in the diary as true. And yet, on anti-reductionism, he would be justified in doing so. What is more, by hypothesis, Sam also lacks defeaters for believing that the alien's testimony is reliable. Thus, unlike in the gullibility objection perhaps, the anti-reductionist could not respond by saying that the presence of defeaters would stop the relevant beliefs from being justified. In other words, as Lackey puts it, this case shows that "epistemic irrationality is involved in accepting a speaker's report in the complete absence of positive reasons" (168).

4. Testimonial Injustice

The epistemology of testimony extends far beyond just the question of (anti-) reductionism about testimonial justification. Miranda Fricker (2007) argues that we can do distinctively *epistemic* harm to speakers when we fail to give their testimony its due. The speakers, she argues, are harmed "specifically in [their] capacity as ... knower[s]" (20).

On Fricker's view, there are two different forms of prejudice in how we receive testimony:

Credibility excess: Giving a speaker *more* credibility than you otherwise would have on irrelevant grounds

Credibility deficit: Giving a speaker *less* credibility than you otherwise would have on irrelevant grounds

Here, an example of the first would be the tendency to give more credibility to a speaker wearing a white lab coat (or some other visual signal of authority).

An example of the second would be the tendency to give less credibility to a speaker on the basis of their race or gender (and associated negative prejudicial beliefs about that race or gender).

Fricker then defines **testimonial injustice** as the injustice that results from some kinds of *credibility deficit*. While she doesn't deny that credibility excesses can have negative consequences, they do not "undermine, insult, or otherwise withhold a proper respect for the speaker qua subject of knowledge" (20). So, this disqualifies such cases from being rightly described as testimonial injustices.

Now, some credibility deficits will be the result of "*innocent error*" (21, author's emphasis); these cases do not constitute injustices either. It is specifically cases of credibility deficit that are the result of **negative prejudice**. Such a prejudice is defined as a judgement that "display[s] some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to some affective investment on the part of the subject" (35).

Fricker is particularly interested in cases of credibility deficit like the example given above. That is, cases that are *systematic* (as opposed to *incidental*), and driven by a negative prejudice based on *identity*. She calls the relevant kind of prejudice a "**negative identity-prejudicial stereotype**", which is defined as follows:

[a] widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalisation that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment. (35)

When testimonial injustice results from this kind of prejudice, it is called **systematic testimonial injustice**.

But what is the distinctively *epistemic* harm that results from such cases of injustice? Well, there are in fact at least three distinct kinds of epistemic harm that result.

- (1) A harm to the **hearer**: The hearer is harmed in that the prejudice creates an obstacle to their forming true beliefs.
- (2) A harm to the **collective**: The collective is harmed insofar as the injustice (i.e. the inability of some speaker(s) to contribute their knowledge to the public domain) constitutes a barrier to freedom of speech.
- (3) A harm to the **speaker**: The speaker is harmed “*in their capacity as a knower*” (44, my emphasis). And, Fricker continues, “[t]o be wronged in one's capacity as a knower is to be wronged in a capacity essential to human value” (44). They are also secondarily harmed (epistemically) if the persistence of testimonial injustice causes them to lose confidence in their beliefs.