

Lecture 2

Testimonial Knowledge, Part I

1. Introduction

The term 'testimonial knowledge' refers (roughly) to knowledge gained via the testimony of others. (We'll return to a formal definition later.)

Some examples of giving/receiving testimony include:

- Asking a local stranger for directions when in a new city.
- Describing an incident to officials following the commission of a crime. (eye-witness testimony)
- Getting advice from your doctor about an ailment.
- Reading a newspaper for an update on current events.
- Consulting the TFL website for information on engineering works.
- Pointing to an aisle when someone asks where the tea is at the shop.
- Making an affirmative-sounding grunt when someone asks if this is the correct platform for the London train.

From these examples we can see that testimony need not always be spoken, and need not always be as official as that given in a court of law. We can also see that we form a huge number of our beliefs on the basis of testimony. In other words, a substantial portion of the things we take ourselves to know would be vulnerable if it turned out that forming beliefs in this way was epistemically illegitimate. What is more, this would have a significant practical impact on our lives (e.g. we couldn't rationally depend on printed timetables, and professional advice).

Many questions can be asked about the nature of testimony and its epistemic status.

- How does testimony confer justification, if at all?
- What makes some testimony better than others? I.e. What accounts for the apparent difference between, say, a doctor's advice about your health and a fortune teller's?
- Does the speaker S have to know that p in order for me to come to know that p via S 's testimony? Does S have to believe that p ?
- Does S 's belief that p (if they have one) have to be justified in order for me to be justified in forming the belief that p on the basis of their testimony?
- Should we distinguish between beliefs formed on the basis of an act of testifying from those formed on the basis of the *content* of that testimony?

2. Refining the 'Target'

For the purposes of our discussion, we will narrow the field of relevant phenomena to a more precise set of beliefs and speaker actions.

First, if testimony is a source of belief, then we can distinguish between *beliefs formed on the basis of testimony* and *testimonial knowledge*. After all, I may have a belief that *p*, which I justifiably formed on the basis of testimony, that nevertheless doesn't constitute knowledge because *p* is false. For simplicity, let's call beliefs formed on the basis of testimony '**testimonial beliefs**'.

Second, we need to distinguish between **non-informational expressions of thought** and genuine testimony (see Lackey 2006: 2). For instance, I might utter a sentence that sounds like testimony, but that is more appropriately understood as an expression of my taste or opinion, or perhaps merely 'conversation-filler'. I might say to a stranger at the same bus stop, "What a nice sunny day, eh!" Here, I'm arguably not intending to convey information to the stranger about the quality of the day; presumably the stranger has also noticed the lack of clouds in the sky. Instead, I'm simply making small talk. *Our account of testimony should rule out small-talk like cases from qualifying as testimony.*

Third, as suggested by the examples we used above, we want our account of testimony to accommodate **different methods of communication** including written, spoken, and gestural (e.g. nodding, pointing).

Fourth, we also want to distinguish between things we learn from the act of communicating itself from those things we learn from the **content of the communicative act**. So, suppose I ask a stranger in Paris directions, and they respond to me in English. From their act of communication I have learned that they speak English, but I have learned that from the act itself; it would be strange to say that the speaker testified to their English-speaking abilities, or that I learned the same from their testimony.

Fifth, our account of testimonial beliefs/knowledge should not include cases of beliefs formed merely in some proximity to an act of testimony. For instance, suppose someone tells me it's snowing outside, and immediately after hearing that, I walk outside, see snow falling, and form the belief that it's snowing outside. Arguably, my reason for forming the belief was the perceptual experience of seeing the snow fall; and if this is the case, it would be inaccurate to describe my knowledge as testimonial. So, we want testimonial beliefs/knowledge to be formed **on the basis of the content of a communicative act**.

Based on these qualifications, we now know that we probably want an account of testimony that is consistent with the following:

T **testifies** that p by making an act of communication a iff (in part) in virtue of a 's communicable content,

- (1) T reasonably intends to convey the information that p , or
- (2) a is reasonably taken as conveying the information that p . (Lackey 2006:3)

S's belief that p is a **testimonial belief** only if:

- (1) some distinct speaker T testifies that p
- (2) S forms the belief that p on the basis of T's testimony

S's belief that p is **testimonial knowledge** only if:

- (1) S's belief that p is a testimonial belief
- (2) S's belief that p is justified
- (3) S's belief that p is true

3. Testimony and Justification

One of the main debates in the epistemology of testimony concerns how testimonial beliefs are justified. There are two opposing positions in this debate: reductionism and antireductionism. These can be roughly understood as follows:

Reductionism: Testimony is *not* a basic source of justification; its justificatory power is parasitic on other sources of justification (e.g. induction, perception)

Antireductionism: Testimony *is* a basic source of justification; we have positive defeasible reason to accept as true that which presented to us as true.

Reductionism can be divided into two different versions:

Global Reductionism: "In order to justifiedly accept a speaker's [testimony], a hearer must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for believing that *testimony is generally reliable*" (Lackey 2006: 5).

Local Reductionism: "In order to justifiedly accept a speaker's testimony, a hearer must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting *the particular report in question*" (Lackey 2006: 5).

4. Problems for Reductionism

Reductionism is often traced back to Hume and his arguments in “On Miracles”.

All that I need for my line of thought is that our confidence in any [testimony] is derived wholly from our observation of the truthfulness of human testimony and of how facts usually conform to the reports witnesses give of them. It is a general maxim that no objects have any discoverable necessary connection with one another, and that all the inferences we can draw from one to another are based merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; so we clearly oughtn't to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony, because there is as little necessary connection between testimony and fact as between any pair of items.

(Enquiries, Sect. X)

Global Reductionism

Recall that this was the position that we're only justified in forming a belief on the basis of testimony if we have a justified belief that testimony *in general* is reliable.

Problem 1: Implausible

This account of testimony seems highly implausible. If global reductionism is true, then in order to form a justified belief on the basis of testimony, I would need to independently verify the trustworthiness of testimony (and would need to do so without asking anyone else about it!). To do this, I would need to take a range of speaker reports, and then independently verify the truth of each of those.

It is certainly not the case that any of us did this before forming any beliefs on the basis of testimony! So, it seems that on this view, none of the beliefs we formed as babies and as children on the basis of testimony from, say, caretakers and educators were justified.

What is more, it is at least not immediately obvious that we could engage in such a study of testimony without using any testimonial beliefs.

Problem 2: Unjustified Induction

Suppose we did try to conduct such a study though. Perhaps you think much of our everyday life contributes to such a study (e.g. someone tells me directions and I then have some experience of either succeeding or failing to arrive at my destination). On global reductionism, we need to have a justified belief that testimony *in general* is reliable. But my experiences of testimony

will be highly limited. The sample will likely be drawn almost entirely from people in my culture, or from people who speak the same language as I do. At the very least, it seems as though there are people who we would (intuitively) say are justified in holding a testimonial belief of whom this would be true (e.g. a person who did not have access to the internet and/or who did not travel to other countries).

Problem 3: Well-Defined Category

It's not obvious that 'testimony in general' makes a well-defined category or type. Put another way, there are radical differences between the intuitive justificatory force of testimony in different circumstances. Consider the doctor v. fortune-teller case from the start, or compare how we might've treated a statement from the Obama administration to how we now treat a statement from the Office of the President. A global reductionist picture would gloss over such details.

Local Reductionism

This position looks like it would be in a position to avoid some of the problems faced by global reductionism. On this picture, we take instances of testimony on a case-by-case basis. Accordingly, we as recipients of testimony need non-testimonial positive reason for accepting some particular bit of testimony.

According to Lackey (2006: 162-3), the positive reasons component of the local reductionist claim can be understood in one of two ways:

(PR-N) Appropriate positive reasons are *necessary* for testimonial justification.

(PR-N&S) Appropriate positive reasons are *necessary and sufficient* for testimonial justification.

We know that the local reductionist must at least accept (PR-N). For, suppose (contra hypothesis) that non-testimonial positive reasons were not necessary for testimonial justification. In this case there could be instances of testimonial justification *without* non-testimonial positive reasons. But according to local reductionism, all testimonial justification reduces to non-testimonial justification (positive reasons). Contradiction. Therefore, (PR-N) must be true on local reductionism.

In fact, Lackey argues, the local reductionist must accept the stronger (PR-N&S). Suppose that non-testimonial positive reasons were not sufficient for testimonial justification. It would follow that there was some instance of testimonial justification

that could not be wholly reduced to non-testimonial positive reasons. But the local reductionist is committed to the claim that every instance of testimonial justification is reducible to non-testimonial positive reasons. So they must accept that non-testimonial positive reasons are also sufficient for testimonial justification.

Lackey then presents a counterexample to (PR-N&S)—specifically, to the sufficiency of non-testimonial reasons for testimonial justification. She argues that it's possible to have perfectly good reasons for accepting someone's testimony, but still be testimonially unjustified. It looks like there are other relevant factors, such as the reliability of the speaker, or their sincerity. But the reductionist has no room in their theory for such considerations.