

# **Testimony and Religious Knowledge**

# Outline

Session 1: Some problems in the epistemology of testimony. 45/15

Session 2: Some proposals for resolving our problems. 45/15

Session 3: Some applications to religious epistemology. 45/15

Session 4: Discussion. 15/45

# Sources

"Religious Knowledge in the Context of Conflicting Testimony," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 82 (2009): 61-76.

"Recent Work on Testimonial Knowledge," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49, 1 (2012): 16-28.

"Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony," in Lukasiewicz and Pouivet (eds.), *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, Verlag, 2012.

"Testimonial Knowledge and the Flow of Information," in Greco and Henderson (eds.), *Epistemic Evaluation*, Oxford: forthcoming.

# Some problems in the epistemology of testimony.

## **Problem 1. Reductionism vs. Anti-reductionism.**

Can testimonial knowledge be “reduced” to some other kind of knowledge?

Is testimonial knowledge *sui generis*, requiring its own distinctive treatment, or is testimonial knowledge merely an instance of, for example, inductive knowledge, requiring no special epistemology over and above that required for inductive knowledge in general?

## Two ways to state the question:

Is testimony an irreducible *source* of knowledge, or can testimonial knowledge be accounted for in terms of other traditional sources of knowledge, such as inductive reasoning?

Are there special *norms* governing belief based on testimony, or can the norms governing testimonial belief be reduce to the same norms governing other kinds of belief?

Following Coady, it is now customary to see David Hume as the archetypical **reductionist** about testimony.

Here it is accepted that we may know in cases where we rely upon testimony but our dependence upon testimony is itself justified in terms of other supposedly more fundamental forms of evidence, namely, the individual's own observations and his inferences from them. (22)

Essentially [Hume's] theory constitutes a reduction of testimony as a form of evidence or support to the status of a species . . . of inductive inference. (79)

Also following Coady, Thomas Reid is commonly cited as the archetypical **anti-reductionist** or “fundamentalist” about testimony:

. . . the fundamentalists refuse to accept that our reliance on testimony can be ‘justified’ in terms of some other supposedly more fundamental sources of knowledge . . . Our reliance on testimony should be regarded as fundamental to the justification of belief in the same sort of way as perception, memory, and inference are. Thomas Reid is the only philosopher, as far as I know, who has explicitly adopted a position like this. (23)

**The major criticism raised against reductionism** is that it makes testimonial knowledge too hard.

Specifically, it is charged that the sort of inductive evidence that reductionism requires is typically unavailable to the hearer. If testimonial knowledge requires such evidence, then this sort of knowledge will be rare.

A special case involves small children learning from their caretakers. Children plausibly lack the requisite reasoning capacities, evidential base.

## **Exchange 1.**

Dad: Where is Mom?

Child: At work.

Dad: Really? How do you know?

Child: She told me.

## **Exchange 2.**

Child: Frogs eat bugs!

Mom: That's right! How did you know that?

Child: My teacher told me.

Remember that a reductionist account of testimonial knowledge will have to bottom out *in non-testimonial knowledge only*. But whether we attribute testimonial knowledge to children early or late, it is implausible that an adequate evidence base, *itself devoid of testimonial knowledge*, will be in place.

What is plausible about attributing testimonial knowledge late is that, as children grow up, their knowledge does increase and so they have more to work with to use in their inductive inferences. What is not plausible, however, is that their knowledge increases in a way that makes it *independent* of the testimonial knowledge that the reductionist means to explain. Specifically, children learn about who they can trust and when largely by *being told* as much.

Again, the prospects for a reductionist account look dim here.

**The major criticism raised against anti-reductionism:** it makes testimonial knowledge too easy.

If testimonial belief does not require non-testimonial evidence—if it is permissible to believe that *p* *merely* on the basis that someone says that *p*—then this looks like gullibility.

More generally, knowledge seems to require some sort of critical appraisal on the part of the knower, but in the absence of appropriate evidence, this seems to be lacking.

**Anti-reductionists respond** along two lines.

First, they emphasize the danger of skeptical results if one insists on the reductionist picture.

Second, they associate reductionist demands for evidence with an overly individualistic (and insufficiently social) approach in epistemology. Reductionism is wedded to an inappropriate ideal of the individual, autonomous knower.

## **What is at stake here?**

Unfortunately, discussions regarding the reducibility of testimony have been hampered by a lack of clarity about what issue is at stake.

More specifically, we may distinguish at least three different questions that get attention in this context.

*a. Is testimonial knowledge distinctive?*

Is testimonial knowledge *sui generis*, or distinctive? Or is it merely a species of some other familiar kind, such as inductive knowledge? Alternatively, are the epistemic principles and norms associated with testimonial knowledge distinctive, or are they the same norms and principles associated with inductive knowledge in general?

This is perhaps the dominant way of framing questions about reducibility. But questions about distinctiveness often get run together with two other questions.

*b. Is testimonial knowledge reason-independent?*

Does testimonial knowledge always depend on non-testimonial reasons? Or is testimonial knowledge non-inferential, and in that sense independent of non-testimonial reasons?

*c. Does testimonial knowledge involve default justification?*

Does testimonial knowledge involve a kind of default justification, or “innocent unless proven guilty” status?

Alternatively, do the epistemic norms associated with testimonial knowledge prescribe default belief, independent of any critical assessment on behalf of the hearer?

**The current literature tends to run these questions together:**

**Reductionism** is characterized as the position that testimonial knowledge is a) non-distinctive, b) reason-dependent, and c) not involving default justification.

**Anti-reductionism** is characterized as the position that testimonial knowledge is a) distinctive, b) reason-independent, and c) involving default justification.

But these are distinct questions, and answers to them need not cluster as above.

For example, testimonial knowledge might be both reason-dependent and yet distinctive. Alternatively, it might be distinctive but not involve default justification.

Let's return to the dominant way of framing questions about the reducibility:

Is testimonial knowledge in some interesting way *distinctive* or *sui generis*?

**Anti-reductionism:** Testimonial knowledge constitutes an epistemically distinctive category.

**Reductionism:** Testimonial knowledge is merely a species of some other familiar kind, such as inductive knowledge.

Ultimately, testimonial knowledge “bottoms out” in other, familiar kinds of knowledge.

# **Different Cases Pull in Different Directions.**

**Case 1.** A seasoned investigator questions a potentially uncooperative witness.

**Case 2.** A lawyer tells you that his client has no money.

**Case 3.** A job applicant tells a personnel director that he has no criminal record.

**Case 4.** You ask a stranger for directions to the train station, and she confidently tells you where it is.

**Case 5.** You ask a stranger whether the city has a subway system, and he says yes, it does.

**Case 6.** Your own lawyer tells you how to hide some money.

**Case 7.** You ask your friend whether she has been to the United States, and she says that yes, she has.

**Case 8.** A third-grade teacher in the United States tells his students that Edinburgh is in Europe.

**Case 9.** A mother tells her child that there is milk in the refrigerator.

**Case 10.** A father tells his child that she was born in the U.S.

Clearly enough, the investigator in **Case 1** can't simply believe what the witness says. Nor can the personnel director just believe the job applicant. Don't believe the lawyer!

As the cases progress, however, it becomes more and more plausible that the hearer can believe straight away what he or she is told. And that he or she thereby knows.

It also becomes more plausible that something epistemically special is going on— for example, that the speaker and hearer enjoy some special relationship, and that this is making an epistemic difference.

Perhaps the relationship between parent and child allows for knowledge transmission, whereas the relationship between investigator and witness does not? Does the attorney-client relationship allow for transmission as well?

**So here is a puzzle to solve:** Why does testimonial knowledge seem easy to get in some cases, but hard to get in others?

Put differently: Why do the epistemic burdens on the hearer seem so different in the different cases?

**Really there are two puzzles:**

- a) Why do (at least some) cases of testimonial knowledge seem so different from cases of non-testimonial knowledge?; and
- b) Why do different cases of testimonial knowledge seem so different from each other?

In effect, we have a set of data to be explained; i.e. a range of cases (both testimonial and non-testimonial) that at least seem to cry out for different treatment.

Reductionists and anti-reductionists take different approaches to solving the puzzles, explaining the data.

## **A Dilemma:**

1. Either testimonial knowledge requires inductive evidence on the part of the hearer or it does not.
2. If it does not, then testimonial knowledge is too easy. There will be cases counted as knowledge that should not be.
3. If it does, then testimonial knowledge is too hard. There will be cases not counted as knowledge that should be.

Therefore,

4. An adequate account of testimonial knowledge is impossible: a given account must make testimonial knowledge either too easy for some cases or too hard for others. Pick your poison.

## **Problem 2. Generation vs. Transmission.**

Does testimony *generate* knowledge, or does it *transmit* knowledge from one knower to another?

The natural view to take here, perhaps, is that testimony transmits knowledge-- testimonial knowledge always begins with knowledge on the part of the speaker, and the function of testimony is to make the speaker's knowledge available to the hearer, to transmit it to the hearer.

## What is natural or plausible about Transmission?

Something like this: In at least some testimonial exchanges, it looks like the hearer comes to know, but not by coming to know "for herself."

In at least some testimonial exchanges, it looks like knowledge is made available *by* the speaker *to* the hearer, or transferred *from* the speaker *to* the hearer. And this is opposed to the hearer having to do the usual epistemic work associated with coming to know.

Put yet another way: In cases of transmission, the hearer is relieved of the usual epistemic burdens associated with coming to know.

## **So does testimony transmit knowledge?**

Again, different cases pull us in different directions.

Seasoned investigator.

Job applicant.

Directions from a stranger.

Lawyer-client.

Teacher-student.

Parent-child.

All this suggests that the debate over transmission is closely related to the debate of reductionism.

For one, if knowledge by transmission is possible, then reductionism is false. That is because "knowledge by transmission" is irreducible to other, familiar kinds of knowledge, where the epistemic burdens in coming to know fall squarely on the knower.

Put differently: In cases of "knowledge by transmission," something epistemically special or distinctive is going on.

## **Problem 3. Is Testimonial Knowledge Distinctively Social?**

In what ways is testimonial knowledge a social phenomenon?

Is it merely that at least two people are involved, or does the social character of testimonial knowledge go deeper than that?

**A question in the background:** To what extent must traditional epistemology be revised in order to adequately accommodate the social character of testimonial knowledge?

This looks to raise many of the same issues above, now in slightly different terms.

For consider: One way that testimonial knowledge might be distinctively social is that it involves something like knowledge transmission. The idea is that testimonial exchanges play that distinctive function in a community of knowers-- testimony serves to transmit or distribute knowledge in a social system, as opposed to generating it or producing it "anew" in each believer.

But if that is right, then it seems that testimonial knowledge can't be reduced to other kinds of knowledge, where a knower does come to know "anew" and "for herself".

At any rate, all of our issues seem related, and all give rise to similar dilemmas for an epistemology of testimony.

## **A dilemma:**

If you opt for reductionism in the epistemology of testimony, you make it impossible to accommodate transmission and difficult to explain how testimonial knowledge is distinctively social. Accordingly, you make testimonial knowledge (in some cases) seem too hard.

If you opt for anti-reductionism, you open up space for both transmission and distinctively social-epistemic phenomena. But in doing so you create a disconnect between the requirements for testimonial knowledge and the requirements for knowledge of any other kind. Accordingly, you make testimonial knowledge (in some cases) seem too easy.

Again, we have a set of data to be explained-- a range of cases that at least seem to cry out for different treatment. It is hard to see how one theory can handle all of them.

## **Session 2:**

**Some proposals for resolving our problems.**

If you opt for reductionism in the epistemology of testimony, you make it impossible to accommodate transmission and difficult to explain how testimonial knowledge is distinctively social. Accordingly, you make testimonial knowledge (in some cases) seem too hard.

If you opt for anti-reductionism, you open up space for both transmission and distinctively social-epistemic phenomena. But in doing so you create a disconnect between the requirements for testimonial knowledge and the requirements for knowledge of any other kind. Accordingly, you make testimonial knowledge (in some cases) seem too easy.

Again, we have a set of data to be explained-- a range of cases that at least seem to cry out for different treatment. It is hard to see how one theory can handle all of them.

## **First, a proposal about methodology.**

When doing epistemology, we ought to raise questions about the role that the concept of knowledge plays in our conceptual-linguistic economy: Why do we have a concept of knowledge in the first place? What purposes does it serve? (Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*)

By raising questions about the point and purpose of our concept of knowledge, we put ourselves in a position to ask the following question about knowledge itself: What would knowledge itself have to be like, for the concept to serve its purposes?

The point or purpose of a concept *constrains* its content, as opposed to getting *built into* its content.

# **The point and purpose of the concept of knowledge: a substantive proposal.**

Craig argues that the central purpose of the concept of knowledge is to flag good information and good sources of information for use in practical reasoning. Put differently, the concept of knowledge is used to identify actionable information and sources of actionable information.

. . . any community may be presumed to have an interest in evaluating sources of information; and in connection with that interest certain concepts will be in use. The hypothesis I wish to try out is that the concept of knowledge is one of them. To put it briefly and roughly, the concept of knowledge is used to flag approved sources of information. (Craig 1990: 11)

## **Elaborations on Craig's proposal.**

Craig's idea can be summed up as this: The concept of knowledge serves to govern the production and flow of actionable information, or information that can be used in action and practical reasoning, within a community of information sharers.

I now want to propose some elaborations on that idea. These will give us the resources for resolving the problems that were articulated in Session 1.

If Craig's idea is even broadly correct, then we should expect there to be at least two kinds of activity governed by the concept of knowledge.

First, there will be activities concerned with *acquiring* information, or getting information into the community of knowers in the first place.

For example, empirical observation serves to acquire information about physical objects in our environment, introspection serves to acquire information about accessible mental states.

Second, there will be activities concerned with *distributing* information throughout the community of knowers; that is, there will be mechanisms for distributing information that is already in the social system.

For example, teaching in the classroom, testifying in court, and reporting in the boardroom all serve this distributing function.

In sum, there will be activities that input information into the system in the first place, and activities that keep the information flowing.

Let's call the first *acquisition activities*, and the second *distribution activities*.

The norms governing the acquisition activities play a “gate-keeping” function-- they exert quality control so as to admit only high quality information into the social system.

The norms governing distribution activities, on the other hand, answer to a distributing function-- they allow high quality information already in the system to be distributed as needed throughout the community of knowers.

Insofar as testimony plays this distributing function, it serves to make information already in the system available to those who need it.

## **An important point for our purposes:**

It is reasonable that the norms governing acquisition activities should be different from the norms governing distribution activities.

Suppose we were writing the norms, or setting the standards, for these two kinds of activity. We should make it harder to get information into the system than we make it to distribute that information, once in.

Again, the dominant concern governing the acquisition function is quality control-- we want a strong gatekeeping mechanism here. But the dominant concern governing the distribution function will be easy access-- we want information that has already passed the quality control test to be easily and efficiently available to those who need it.

Hence different norms or standards are appropriate to these distinct functions. (Military Base Analogy)

# **Scientific knowledge as an instance of this general picture.**

Any item of scientific knowledge must have its original source, presumably in reliable method. But eventually that knowledge spreads through a shared system by means of various kinds of testimony.

Through record keeping, formal and informal teaching, journal articles, public lectures, media reports, and the like, what begins as knowledge for a few becomes knowledge for many.

Moreover, the norms and standards governing the first kind of activity are different from the norms and standards governing the second. Quality control is exercised over both kinds of activity, but in different ways. Hence the norms governing the exchange of information through journals, seminars, etc., are distinct from those governing experiment design, statistical analysis, theory choice, etc.

In the case of scientific knowledge, then, various institutional and social practices are in place so as to bring high quality information into the system, and also to distribute it through the system. Different norms govern these different practices, each according to its distinctive purpose or function.

What holds for scientific knowledge in this regard plausibly holds for knowledge in general.

Notice that on the account of knowledge that emerges, knowledge from testimony becomes paradigmatic rather than an odd bird. That is, it becomes paradigmatic of the second category of knowledge that we expect to find— knowledge grounded in the appropriate distribution of information.

The account also predicts that testimonial knowledge (as such) should be ubiquitous.

## **A further suggestion:**

Testimonial knowledge *itself* comes in two kinds.

That is, testimonial knowledge sometimes serves the distribution function of the concept of knowledge, and sometimes the acquisition function.

The distribution function gives us the paradigmatic case. Case 5 (student/teacher) and Case 6 (parent/child).

But testimony sometimes serves an acquisition function, bringing information into a community of knowledge for the first time. Case 1 (investigator), and Case 2 (job applicant).

This explains why a student or a child can believe straight away what a teacher or a parent tells her, and also explains why an investigator or interviewer cannot.

NB: The idea is not that, in the distribution role, testimonial knowledge involves no burdens on the hearer at all. The hearer does not get to “just believe” what she is told.

Rather, the idea is that the burdens on the hearer are different in the distribution role than in the acquisition role, insofar as the norms governing the two activities are at the service of different purposes.

Recall the military base analogy.

## **Reductionism vs. Anti-reductionism.**

Can testimonial knowledge be reduced to some other kind of knowledge, for example inductive knowledge?

Answer: Presumably there will be two kinds of testimonial knowledge: a) one in which testimony functions as an original source, along with perception, induction, and other familiar originating sources; and b) one in which testimony functions as a transmitting source. In the first case, testimonial knowledge plausibly reduces to other kinds of knowledge. In the second case, testimonial knowledge is distinctive and requires a distinctive treatment.

# Generation vs. Transmission.

**Transmission:** The function of testimony is to transmit knowledge from speaker to hearer, rather than to generate it.

We may now understand **Transmission** as follows: The function of testimony is to distribute information from speaker to hearer, rather than to produce information for the first time.

Alternatively: The function of testimony is to distribute information that is already possessed by the epistemic community.

The present account endorses a qualified transmission thesis.

Qualified, because on the present account not *all* testimony serves to transmit knowledge, even in cases where the speaker knows, and not *all* testimonial knowledge is transmitted knowledge.

Nevertheless, the *distinctive epistemic function* of testimony is to transmit knowledge. That is what makes testimonial knowledge epistemically interesting in its own right, when it is.

# Is Testimonial Knowledge Distinctively Social?

On this account, yes. That is, we allow for a disconnect between the requirements for *one kind* of testimonial knowledge-- the irreducible kind-- and the requirements for knowledge of any other kind.

But we deny that this makes testimonial knowledge too easy. On the contrary, the account makes testimonial knowledge easy in cases where it should be easy, and hard in cases where it should be hard.

.

## **Session 3:**

# **Some Applications to Religious Epistemology**

## **The Argument from Accident of Birth.**

If I had been born into a different testimonial tradition, I would have formed different religious beliefs on the basis of different testimony. *But it is just an accident that I was born into my religious tradition rather than another.*

One might say: My beliefs are “tracking my tradition” rather than “tracking the truth”.

1. When one forms a true religious belief on the basis of testimony from within a tradition, it is just an accident (just a matter of luck) if one forms a true belief rather than a false belief.
2. Knowledge cannot tolerate that sort of luck or accident.

Therefore,

3. True religious belief based on testimony from within a tradition cannot count as knowledge.

# The Argument from Peer Disagreement

If my “epistemic peers” disagree with me on some issue, then it is irresponsible or irrational to continue believing as I do. I ought to lose my confidence, or even suspend my belief, at least until the disagreement can be explained and resolved.

But there are epistemic peers (and even epistemic superiors!) who disagree with me about my religious beliefs, and I have not way to resolve the disagreement in my favor.

1. If my epistemic peers disagree with me on some issue, then it is irresponsible or irrational to continue believing as I do.

2. But many people who are my epistemic peers disagree with me on matters religious. In particular, my peers in different testimonial traditions do.

Therefore,

3. It is irrational or irresponsible for me to continue believing as I do in matters religious.

# **An Argument from Hume (reconstructed)**

Premise 1:

In any case where we are presented with testimony that a purported miracle M has occurred, we must weigh that testimonial evidence in favor of M's occurrence against our evidence that M has not occurred.

Premise 2:

But if M is a purported miracle, then M must conflict with an apparent law of nature L, for which our evidence must be excellent.

Our evidence for L (and hence against M' s occurrence) must amount to excellent inductive evidence, or else L would not be an apparent law of nature.

In Hume' s terms, our inductive evidence for L must constitute a “perfect proof.”

Premise 3:

On the other hand, our testimonial evidence in favor of M's occurrence will always be less than excellent.

In general, we often observe cases where testimony is false.

In particular, we know of many cases where testimony that some miracle has occurred is false.

In Hume's terms, we always have a less than "perfect proof" for the veracity of testimony.

1. In any case where we are presented with testimony that a purported miracle  $M$  has occurred, we must weigh that testimonial evidence in favor of  $M$ 's occurrence against our evidence that  $M$  has not occurred.

2. But if  $M$  is a purported miracle, then  $M$  must conflict with an apparent law of nature  $L$ , for which our evidence must be excellent.

3. On the other hand, our testimonial evidence in favor of  $M$ 's occurrence will always be less than excellent.

Therefore,

4. In all cases where we are presented with testimony that some miracle has occurred, our testimonial evidence in favor of  $M$ 's occurrence will always be weaker than our evidence against  $M$ 's occurrence. (from 1-3)

Therefore,

5. We can never be justified, merely on the basis of testimonial evidence, that a purported miracle has occurred. (from 4)

Therefore,

6. We can never know, merely on the basis of testimonial evidence, that a purported miracle has occurred. (also from 4)

## **Too Rosy a Picture?**

One might object that the present approach to testimonial evidence, and its application to religious knowledge in particular, paint too rosy a picture—that it makes knowledge of God too easy.

But whether the picture does make knowledge of God easy, or whether it allows for testimonial knowledge of God at all, depends on the answers to some further questions.

First, it depends on the existence and extent of knowledge-generating sources. Accordingly, the present approach to testimony and knowledge of God depends on prior issues in religious epistemology, i.e. issues regarding whether and how knowledge of God is generated.

But suppose we take it for granted that there are such generating sources. Questions still remain concerning the conditions for the successful transmission of that knowledge.

What, in general, are the conditions for the successful transmission of knowledge within a testimonial tradition? Are those conditions met by religious traditions today?

Three avenues of transmission:

1. Inter-personal exchanges. (innate trust, learned trust)
2. Social norms. (social roles, expectations, etc. “social intelligence”)
3. Institutional structures. (institutional rules, roles, etc.)

What are the conditions for successful inter-personal transmission?  
At the very least: personal expertise and inter-personal trust. What are the nature and conditions of these? What more is required?

What are the conditions for successful institutional transmission?  
At the very least: institutional expertise and institutional integrity.  
In other words, institutional authority. What are the nature and conditions of these? What more is required?

Is it plausible that religious knowledge can be transmitted by today's social environment, via today's religious institutions?

## **Some further questions for a “social religious epistemology.”**

A central issue in contemporary social epistemology is whether there exists group knowledge that is irreducible to individual knowledge.

Putting the question a different way: Is the primary seat of knowledge sometimes a social group rather than its individual members, so that the knowledge of individuals is in an important sense secondary or derivative?

This question is of obvious interest for religious epistemology, where we might ask if the knowledge of individuals depends in a similar way on knowledge of the religious community, or church.

A second set of issues in social epistemology regards the nature and role of epistemic authority.

For example, how are we to understand expertise in a domain, and under what conditions is expert knowledge transmitted to non-experts?

Is epistemic authority always grounded in expertise, or can it be grounded in institutional or other social roles? For example, can knowledge be transmitted through a ‘spokesperson’, even if that person has no special expertise regarding the knowledge in question?

Clearly, these questions will be of interest in religious epistemology and in the epistemology of theology as well as general epistemology.

Such questions frame a kind of research program for social epistemology.

For social epistemology in general, and for a “social religious epistemology” in particular.

Thank you