



Knowledge and Testimony

Are words just evidence? Or can they have *authority*?

Epistemic authority

- Formally, epistemic authority is often expressed using “expert principles”, e.g.
 - “If you know that an expert believes P , then you should believe P ”
- The rough idea of an authority is as something that must be followed, or obeyed.

- Authority is generally a relation. “A is an authority for B”.
- E.g. the high school physics teacher is an authority for (most) high school students, but not for a top physicist.

- An authority need not be infallible; they just to *know more than you*.
 - E.g. it may be rational to accept the probabilities of a weather forecast, even knowing they're often wrong.

- A parent is an authority for his own children, but not for other children (to the same extent).
- Small children seem to be designed to absorb their own parents' beliefs.

The “Principal Principle” for physical probability

(blame David Lewis)

- “If you know that the physical chance of some event E is or was q (and you don’t have any knowledge resulting from the occurrence or non-occurrence of E itself) then your subjective probability for E should be q .”
 - The condition in parentheses is needed, as you might know that the *chance* of heads was 0.4, yet you *saw* it land heads. In other words, chance is a defeasible authority – it can be trumped by a higher epistemic authority.

The authority of “Truth”, i.e. the facts

- The Truth is the highest epistemic authority, in the sense that it is non-defeasible. It cannot be trumped or undermined.

If you know that P is an actual state of affairs, then you should believe that P , no matter what else you know.

“The ultimate expert, presumably, is the *truth* function — the function that assigns 1 to all the true propositions and 0 to all the false ones. Knowledge of its values should surely trump knowledge of the values assigned by human experts (including one’s future selves), frequencies, or chances. ... the truth of *A* overrides anything the expert might say.”

- Alan Hayek, *SEP* entry on “Interpretations of Probability”

Testimony

“If you believe something on the basis of my testimony, you understand what I am saying, and take my word for it.”

(Nagel, p. 73)

Locke

- Locke says that testimony cannot provide *knowledge*.
 - At best, it provides a (somewhat) justified belief.

Locke tells the story of the King of Siam hearing from a Dutch ambassador that water in Holland becomes solid enough in winter to support the weight of a man, or even an elephant (if you could coax an elephant to Holland in the winter). The king is said to have replied, ‘Hitherto I have believed the strange things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man, but now I am sure you lie.’ (Nagel, p. 74).

Locke thinks the King is being quite *reasonable*.

- In other words, belief on the basis of testimony cannot be certain, because the speaker may be lying, or insane, etc.
- “The key difference is **certainty**, which for Locke is a necessary condition for knowledge. Because perception can make you immediately certain of something, as certain as you are intuitively that red is not black, you can gain knowledge perceptually.”
(Nagel, p. 2)

Testimony is mere 'second hand' belief

“we may as rationally hope to see with other men’s eyes as to know by other men’s understanding...

...The floating of other men’s opinions in our brains makes us **not one jot the more knowledge**, though they happen to be true. What in them was science is in us but opiniatrety.”

(Locke 1689, 58)

- Nevertheless, Locke thinks that **a reasonable person will form beliefs on the basis of testimony**, when his criteria are met.
- ‘we receive it as easily, and build as firmly upon it, as if it were certain knowledge’.
- Locke’s criteria:
 1. The number of witnesses
 2. Their integrity
 3. Their skill
 4. The purpose they have in supplying their report
 5. The internal consistency of what is conveyed, and the circumstances of your hearing it
 6. Whether there is any contrary testimony

- If Locke is right, then we do have a lot of reasonable beliefs, but we don't *know* much at all. (Since most of our beliefs are based on testimony.)
- **Is Locke correct** in thinking that we cannot *know* anything by testimony?

Argument against Locke

“[Locke’s] argument about vulnerability to later doubts is questionable, in part because it seems to apply equally well to judgements grounded in perception and memory, which he does want to classify as knowledge.” (Nagel, p. 76).

- (But I guess with testimony there are 2 possible sources of falsehood, not just 1. There’s *duplicity* as well as honest error.)

“Of course, there could be situations in which you fail to have doubts, and take the word of a liar as if she were telling the truth, but these situations are parallel to situations in which you are taken in by a perceptual illusion. If there is a **big** difference between the knowledge-providing powers of perception and testimony, Locke hasn’t shown us what it is.”

Nagel, p. 76

Internalism?

- What will internalists say about knowledge on the basis of testimony?
- A JTB fallibilist, for example, might say that (at least when Locke's criteria are met) **the degree of justification passes the threshold** required for knowledge.

Externalism?

- Causal theory
 - The belief is caused by the fact, so we have knowledge.
- Truth tracking
 - Ok, for truth-tracking witnesses
- Process reliabilism
 - Ok, for reliable witnesses
- Engineering perspective
 - A lot depends on whether we're *designed* to accept testimony.

'Reductionism' about testimony

- **Beliefs formed on the basis of testimony are a kind of knowledge**, but there's no special mechanism at work. Like any inductive inference, you're inferring the best explanation of the testimonial data.
- E.g. one might use Locke's criteria:
 1. The number of witnesses
 2. Their integrity
 3. Their skill
 4. The purpose they have in supplying their report
 5. The internal consistency of what is conveyed, and the circumstances of your hearing it
 6. Whether there is any contrary testimony

Witnesses are treated as traces, or indicators, but not as *authorities*.

Reductionism

- The reductionist treats human witnesses like any other non-personal indicator, or trace, from which we infer what's happened. E.g.
 - Footprints
 - Cookie crumbs on the counter
 - Skid marks, etc.
- Such traces support inferences, but they aren't *authorities*. (Any authority here lies with the person making the inference.)
- In effect, reductionism erases the distinction (in law) between *direct* and *circumstantial* evidence.

Circumstantial vs. Direct evidence

- Circumstantial (or indirect) evidence is any fact that is distinct from the fact to be proved, so that the court must *infer* (e.g. by using IBE) the truth of that fact.
- By contrast, **direct evidence requires no such inference**, as the witness is simply telling us that (e.g.) the accused stabbed the victim.
- N.B. The distinction here is **not** one of power, or persuasiveness.

“Circumstantial evidence can be, and often is much more powerful than direct evidence.” (law prof. Robert Precht, quoted in Wikipedia!)

Empirical evidence that checking occurs

Often we **seem** to simply trust people, not bothering to check their reliability. However:

“Recent empirical work on ‘epistemic vigilance’ has advanced our understanding of how and when we actually accept the word of others. Even if we aren’t explicitly thinking to ourselves about the reliability of the stranger we’ve asked for directions, we could be monitoring his facial expressions and speech patterns to assess how trustworthy he is.” (Nagel, pp. 79-80).

Locke vs. the reductionists

- Locke says that a belief obtained by testimony is never knowledge, but mere reasonable opinion, whereas reductionists say that testimony can (in the right circumstances) provide a sufficient degree of justification to count as knowledge.
- Qu.: Is this a real disagreement, or merely verbal?

‘Direct’ view of testimony

“Akṣapāda Gautama in the 2nd century C.E. :

“Gautama maintains that testimony is a special channel through which we gain knowledge, and emphasizes that *testimony is not a form of inference*.

We do not think to ourselves: ‘Lee has said that Smith got the job, and Lee is a reliable person, therefore Smith got the job.’ We know, as soon as we understand what Lee has said, that Smith got the job”

- Nagel, pp. 80-81.

'Direct' view of testimony

- On the direct view of testimony, a speaker can (in some cases) have *epistemic authority*, which is quite different from being a reliable indicator.
 - An epistemic authority must be a rational person who speaks, not mere physical evidence to be interpreted.
 - I have grounds to believe what they say, simply because *they say so*, not because of the content of what is said.
 - Their testimony *replaces*, and does not add to, my existing reasons for belief.

- Someone figures as an epistemic authority only if:
 - (i) their believing something provides content-independent reasons for believing it myself, so that if they had believed something else instead, that would have been a reason for me to emulate them;
 - (ii) their believing something provides preemptive reasons to believe it, *reasons that replace, rather than add to, my other reasons*;
 - (iii) a dependency thesis holds, in that their belief is “formed in a way that I would conscientiously believe is deserving of emulation”
 - (iv) a justification thesis holds, in that it is my conscientious belief that I’m more likely to believe well if I emulate the authority.
- Linda Zagzebski (2012), *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*, pp. 105–113. (Summarised by Guy Longworth.)

Thomas Reid on testimony

“The Reidian account of testimonial trust is that since God intended us to be ‘social creatures’, he implanted in us “a propensity to speak the truth,” *the principle of veracity*, as well as, correspondingly “a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us,” *the principle of credulity* (Reid 1983, 94–95)”.
(*SEP*, article on testimony)

- I.e. Reid takes the engineering perspective. We’re designed to *believe* others, not just treat them as evidence. This is a good example of the direct theory.
 - The direct theory holds that testimony uses a special cognitive mechanism, on top of the usual mechanisms of perception, memory and inference. A “special channel”.

“Where reductionists and Lockeans think it is right to maintain a neutral stance towards public testimony until we can verify it with our private resources (our own perceptions and inferences), advocates of the direct view suggest that we do not have sufficient private resources available to manage that kind of verification.

... We wouldn't be able to understand each other in the first place if we didn't start by trusting others to tell the truth and accepting what they say at face value. On this view, we drink in what others say, in something like the way bees do.

Nagel, p. 81.

(bee communication = 'cognition by proxy')

Questions

- Is the direct theory *only* for those that take such an engineering perspective?
- Can other externalists accept it?
- Can *internalists* accept the direct theory?

Testimony requires the speaker to know?

“Knowing P on the basis of testimony requires that the witness first knows P.

Jennifer Lackey uses the image of a ‘bucket brigade’ to illustrate this ‘take it from someone who knows’ condition on testimonial knowledge: ‘[I]n order to give you a full bucket of water, I must have a full bucket of water to pass to you.’”

- Nagel, p. 82.

- Nagel describes a case of a creationist schoolteacher teaching the theory of natural selection. Do her students now *know* the theory, from her testimony?
- In the story, it seems that the students are unaware that the teacher rejects the theory, and so believe it on her authority.
 - Maybe internalists and externalists will disagree here?

Groups?

- Can *groups* be reliable authorities, even if the members of those groups aren't?
(Wikipedia?? The “wisdom of crowds”?)
- Testimony has social and moral aspects. E.g. an out-group can be ‘silenced’ by the mainstream, simply by not taking their claims seriously, i.e. treating their claims as lacking any authority. [#believewomen](#)
- Does the ‘silencing’ phenomenon show that testimony is direct, rather than inference?