Knowledge and 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.

*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

- 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 authority 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 have a lot of reasonable beliefs, but we don’t know much at all. (Since most of our beliefs are based on authority.)
• Is Locke correct in thinking that we cannot know anything by authority?
“[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
  – Depends on whether we’re designed to accept testimony?
‘Reductionism’ about testimony

• Forming beliefs on the basis of testimony is a kind of *scientific 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, 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 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

“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.
‘Direct’ view of testimony

“Akṣapāda Gautama in the 2nd century ce.:

“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.
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)

• 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. 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.
• Is the direct theory just for those that take such an engineering perspective?
• Can other externalists accept it?
• Can internalists accept the direct theory?
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.

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.
Groups?

• Can *groups* be reliable authorities, even if the members of those groups aren’t? (Wikipedia?? The “wisdom of crowds”?)

• Knowledge 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.

• Does the ‘silencing’ phenomenon show that testimony is direct, rather than inference?
British philosopher Edward Craig argues that humanity came up with the concept of knowledge for the express purpose of managing the problem of testimony: we use this concept to mark people as good sources of information. Craig starts with the idea that all creatures struggling to survive need true beliefs about their environment. It helps us greatly if we are not restricted to what we have experienced personally but can also learn from others. It’s imperative that we have a way of sorting out good informants, who can serve as our eyes and ears, from bad informants, who are likely to lead us astray. Good informants are identified as knowers.

• Nagel, p. 85.
Objections to Craig’s view:

• “Knowers can sometimes be bad informants—knowers can be secretive or deceptive.”

• “It is hard for Craig to say why we see the victim of a Gettier case as failing to know. The victim of the Gettier case will in some sense be a good informant—as someone with a justified true belief, he is getting it right and in some sense thinking reliably.”

• “In experimental settings, chimpanzees can’t distinguish between knowledgeable and ignorant informants who give them clues about where food is hidden. Chimpanzees can, however, keep track of who knows what when they are competing for resources: for example, subordinate chimpanzees are good at remembering whether a dominant animal knows where food is hidden. The connection between knowing and acting seems to be easier to spot than the connection between knowing and being a good informant.”

From Nagel, pp. 85-86.