

# Disjunctivism and the Epistemology of Testimony

Stephen Wright, University of Oxford

## 1 The Elements of Testimonial Disjunctivism

Testimonial disjunctivism comes from thinking about perceptual knowledge in disjunctivist terms:

(DPK) In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge a subject, S, has perceptual knowledge that  $\phi$  in virtue of being in possession of rational support, R, for her belief that  $\phi$  which is both factive (ie., R's obtaining entails  $\phi$ ) and reflectively accessible to S [Pritchard, 2012b, p. 13].

Applied to testimony, this gives us the following:

(DTK) In paradigmatic cases of testimonial knowledge a listener, L, has testimonial knowledge that  $\phi$  in virtue of being in possession of rational support, R, for her belief that  $\phi$  which is both factive (ie., R's obtaining entails  $\phi$ ) and reflectively accessible to L.

There are three distinctive elements:

- (1) A claim about the nature of a factive reason that grounds a listener's knowledge that  $\phi$ , in a paradigmatic case of testimonial knowledge that  $\phi$ .
- (2) A claim about why we should think that this factive reason is reflectively accessible to the listener.
- (3) A claim about the kind of paradigmatic case of testimonial knowledge that  $\phi$  in which this factive reason that grounds the listener's knowledge that  $\phi$  is reflectively accessible to the listener.

An illustration from McDowell:

The idea of knowledge by testimony is that if a knower gives intelligible expression to his knowledge, he puts it into the public domain, where it can be picked up by those who can understand the expression, as long as the opportunity is not closed to them because it would be doxastically irresponsible to believe the speaker [McDowell, 1994, p. 438].

## 2 Reductionism, Anti-Reductionism and Testimonial Disjunctivism

Two claims commonly associated with reductionism:

- (R1) A listener's belief in a speaker's testimony amounts to knowledge only if the listener has reflectively accessible reasons for believing the speaker.
- (R2) The epistemic grounds that support the listener's knowledge do not extend beyond the reasons she uses in forming her belief.

Two claims associated with anti-reductionism:

- (A1) A listener's belief in a speaker's testimony can amount to knowledge even if the listener lacks reflectively accessible reasons for believing the speaker.
- (A2) The epistemic grounds that support the listener's knowledge can extend beyond the reasons she uses in forming her belief.

McDowell's disjunctivism has traditionally been interpreted as endorsing (A1) and (A2). I think that there's as good a case for thinking of it in terms of (R1) and (R2).

Acquiring a speaker's knowledge is usually taken to involve endorsing (A2) but the important point is that the disjunctivist conception of what is reflectively accessible includes this.

McDowell rejects the claim that background reasons ground knowledge, but also rejects the claim that listeners have an *entitlement*.

### **3 The Viability of Testimonial Disjunctivism**

#### **3.1 Objection 1 – Gullibility**

Anti-reductionist theories are traditionally attacked on the grounds of gullibility, such as Lackey's ALIEN case, or Faulkner's FORTUNE TELLER case.

#### **3.2 Objection 2 – The Argument from Cooperation**

The Argument from Cooperation threatens to place a demand for a reason that extends beyond the kind of reason that disjunctivists emphasise.

#### **3.3 Objection 3 – Phenomenological Implausibility**

Even if disjunctivism about perceptual knowledge is plausible, there is a concern that this doesn't translate easily (or at all) into disjunctivism about testimonial knowledge.

#### **3.4 Responses**

These can be met in the same way. The fact that disjunctivist theories are interested only in epistemic paradigm cases means that they aren't committed to implausible claims in this way.