

The Epistemology of Testimony

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Testimony

- ▶ A lot of what we know depends on testimony: history, geography, science etc...
- ▶ Testimony can take a variety of forms: diaries, newspapers, overheard conversations etc...

How do we know?

- ▶ We clearly *do* form justified beliefs based on testimony.
- ▶ But we clearly *don't* do this all of the time.

The epistemology of testimony seeks to explain how beliefs based on testimony get to be justified.

Reasons and doctors

Compare the following two cases:

Doctor 1

A doctor performs a thorough test to determine whether or not you have condition ϕ and reports that you do.

Doctor 2

A doctor *appears to you* to perform a thorough test to determine whether or not you have condition ϕ and reports that you do. In reality, however, the doctor is merely guessing.

Are they alike?

Yes – *Internalist* theories of testimony (Fricker 1994, 1995; Fumerton 2006; Schmitt 1998).

A listener's belief is supported by her reasons for thinking that the speaker's testimony is true.

Gullibility

- ▶ Internalist theories can explain why believing a speaker without *any* reasons for thinking that a speaker's testimony is true exhibits the epistemic vice of *gullibility*.
- ▶ Fricker (1994, 1995) makes this point most forcefully.

Testimony and Instruments

Compare the following two cases:

Instruments

An individual looks at a thermometer which says that the temperature is 20°C and comes to believe that the temperature is 20°C.

Testimony

A speaker tells a listener that the temperature is 20°C and the listener comes to believe that the temperature is 20°C.

Are they alike? (1)

Yes – *reliabilist* theories of testimony (Goldberg 2010; Graham 2010; Lackey 2008; Sosa 2010).

A listener's belief is supported by the reliability of the process(es) involved in believing the speaker's testimony.

- ▶ The individual *presumes* the thermometer to be reliable and the listener *presumes* the speaker to be reliable.
- ▶ Both beliefs are supported by the *reliability* of the process(es) involved in the production of the speaker's testimony.

Are they alike? (2)

No – *transmission* theories of testimony (Burge 1992; Faulkner 2011; Hinchman 2005; Wright 2014).

A listener's belief is supported by the speaker's justification for what she says.

- ▶ The listener might *presume* the speaker to be knowledgeable.
- ▶ In this case, a listener's belief is supported by the speaker's justification transmitted to the listener.

Against Internalism

Is it really correct to think that the listeners in the two doctor cases are alike?

- ▶ We might think that, actually, there's a sense in which one is better off than the other (Wright, 2016).
- ▶ Equally we might think that reasons are good where they connect a listener to reliably-produced testimony (Lackey 2008).
- ▶ So our justification seems to be more than just our reasons.

Against Reliability

Is it really correct to think that all we do is rely on one another?

- ▶ We might think that people can *know* things where instruments cannot.
- ▶ This means that we can make presumptions about them that we can't about instruments (Holton 1994, Faulkner 2011, Wright 2014).
- ▶ And this might mean that our justification isn't just reliability.

Against Transmission

Is it really correct to think that justification is transmitted?

CONSISTENT LIAR

A speaker reliably believes things that are false but then reliably lies and says things that are true.

- ▶ It seems as though a listener could form justified beliefs by believing such a speaker.
- ▶ But this can't be explained in terms of transmission (Lackey 2008).

Towards a solution

We want an account of testimony to do two things:

- ▶ Give the right account of which beliefs are justified and which are not.
- ▶ Do this in a principled, rather than arbitrary fashion.

Combining the theories

We might say that justification is *sometimes* a matter of a listener's reasons, *sometimes* a matter of reliability and *sometimes* a matter of transmission.

- ▶ If there is a difference between the two doctor cases, then this only shows that an internalist account is *incomplete*.
- ▶ If there are presumptions that are not presumptions of reliability, then this only shows that a reliabilist account is *incomplete*.
- ▶ If there are cases that cannot be explained in terms of transmission, then this only shows that transmission theories are *incomplete*.

Is this principled?

- ▶ The question then becomes *when* does each of these become relevant?
- ▶ One answer might appeal to the way that the listener responds to the speaker's testimony:
 - ▶ If the listener uses her own reasons, then her belief is justified by these.
 - ▶ If the listener presumes the speaker to be reliable, then her belief is supported by reliability.
 - ▶ If the listener presumes the speaker to be knowledgeable, then her belief is supported by what grounds the speaker's knowledge.

Conclusions

A theory of testimony needs to account for as much of our justified belief as possible.

- ▶ The theory here purports to explain the diverse ways in which we can believe people.
- ▶ And it seeks to do this by bringing together different explanations of justification from testimony.