Transmission and Subject-Sensitive Invariantism

Stephen Wright, Jesus College Oxford

SSI

Case 1: AJ is wondering whether or not the chocolate brownie in front of her contains nuts. From looking at it, she can't see any signs of nuts in it, but it's very important to her, because she's highly allergic to nuts. Anne is also wondering whether or not the chocolate brownie in front of her contains nuts. Like AJ, she can't see any signs of nuts in it from looking at it, but unlike AJ, Anne isn't highly allergic to nuts.

Transmission Principles

(T$_1$)   In cases where a listener's knowledge is to be explained in terms of transmission, a listener can come to know that ϕ by believing a speaker's testimony that ϕ only if the speaker is in a position to know that ϕ.

(T$_2$)   If a speaker is in a position to know that ϕ, then a listener can (under the right circumstances) come to know that ϕ by believing the speaker's testimony that ϕ.

The Incompatibility

Case 2: Maddie has been reading Descartes' *Meditations* and is in the grip of sceptical concerns, to the point that she is concerned that all her experiences might in fact be dreams. Her friend Eleanor asks her whether the Queens' Lane Coffee House will be open after dinner and Maddie tells her that it is. Eleanor comes to believe this because Maddie told her.[1]

(1)   SSI is true (Assumption).

(2)   Eleanor can come to know that the Queens' Lane Coffee House will be open after dinner by believing Maddie (from **(1)** plus the truth of what Maddie says).[2]

(3)   Maddie does not know that the Queens' Lane Coffee House will be open after dinner (from **(1)**).

Therefore

(4)   Eleanor can come to know that the Queens' Lane Coffee House will be open after dinner by believing Maddie even though Maddie doesn't know this herself (**(2)** and **(3)**).

---

[1] This is based on Jennifer Lackey's **Serious Student** case (Lackey, 2008, p. 61).

[2] Strictly, also requires the additional assumption that testimony can, *at least sometimes* provide knowledge-supporting grounds.

(5)   If (T_1) is true, then it isn't the case that Eleanor can come to know that the Queens' Lane Coffee House will be open after dinner by believing Maddie even though Maddie doesn't know this herself (Definition of (T_1)).

Therefore

(6) (T_1) is not true ((4), (5), *modus tollens*).

(7)   If transmission theories are true, then (T_1) is true (Definition of transmission).

Therefore

(8)   Transmission theories are not true ((6), (7), *modus tollens*).

Therefore

(9)   If SSI is true, transmission theories are false ((1), (8)).

Case 3: Verity and Hannah share a car. Verity believes that the car is on the drive since she left it there in the morning. When Hannah asks whether the car is on the drive, Verity tells her that she left it there earlier. Hannah thus infers that it's still there. When Verity subsequently asks whether the car is still on the drive, since she hasn't moved the car herself, Hannah tells Verity that it is. It's very important to Verity, that the car hasn't been stolen, though, since she has to renew the insurance. It's less important to Hannah, since she doesn't. Verity is thus concerned about the possibility of the car having been stolen since she left it in the morning, whereas Hannah isn't.[3]

(10)   SSI is true (Assumption).

(11)   Hannah knows that the car is on the drive (from (1) plus the truth of Hannah's belief).

(12)   Verity cannot come to know that the car is on the drive by believing Hannah (from (1)).

Therefore

(13)   Verity cannot come to know that the car is on the drive by believing Hannah, even though Hannah knows this ((11), (12)).

(14)   If (T_2) is true, then Verity can come to know that the car is on the drive by believing Hannah, even though Hannah knows this (Definition of (T_2)).

Therefore

(15) (T_2) is not true ((13), (14), *modus tollens*).

(16)   If transmission theories are true, then (T_2) is true (Definition of transmission).

Therefore

(17)   Transmission theories are not true ((15), (16), *modus tollens*).

Therefore

(18)   If SSI is true, then transmission theories are false ((11), (17)).

---

[3] This is based on John MacFarlane's **Knowledge Laundering** (2005) case.

Modified Transmission Principles

(T*)   Under the right circumstances, when a listener comes to know that ϕ by believing a knowledge-able speaker's testimony that ϕ, the listener's knowledge that ϕ can be grounded in the grounds the support the speaker's knowledge that ϕ.

(T$_1$*)   In cases where a listener's knowledge is to be explained in terms of transmission, a listener can come to know that ϕ by believing a speaker's testimony that ϕ only if the speaker is in a position to know that ϕ *according to the set of standards relevant to the listener knowing that ϕ*.

(T$_2$*)   If a speaker is in a position to know that ϕ, then a listener can (under the right circumstances) come to know that ϕ *according to the set of standards according to which the speaker knows that ϕ* by believing the speaker's testimony that ϕ.

Modified Premises

(7*)   If transmission theories are true, then **(T$_1$*)** is true (Definition of transmission).

(5*)   If **(T$_1$*)** is true, then it isn't the case that Eleanor can come to know that the Queens' Lane Coffee House will be open after dinner by believing Maddie even though Maddie doesn't know this herself.

(16*)   If transmission theories are true, then **(T$_2$*)** is true (Definition of transmission).

(14*)   If **(T$_2$*)** is true, then it isn't the case that Verity cannot come to know that the car is on the drive by believing Hannah, even though Hannah knows this.

References

Lackey, Jennifer. 2008. *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacFarlane, John. 2005. "Knowledge Laundering: Testimony and Sensitive Invariantism." *Analysis* 65 (2): 132–138.