

Towards a Social Epistemology of Memory

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Recent work in the epistemology of testimony has contested the status of testimony as evidence of what is said. I examine the extent to which memory can be said to have a similar evidential status.

Two Background Ideas

- Memory and testimony are fundamentally similar epistemic sources.
- Testimony is unique—or at any rate, unlike memory—in that it cannot simply be accounted for in terms of evidence.

Testimony and Evidence

Ross and Moran

- According to Angus Ross (1986) and Richard Moran (2005), there is an important difference between testimony, in a case where a speaker *tells* a listener something and ordinary evidence, such as those constituted by natural signs.
 1. Testimony is recognised as deliberately and voluntarily produced with the intention of bringing about belief.
 2. When something supposed to be evidence is recognised as having the character associated with testimony, its evidential status is undermined.
- The result is that the epistemology of testimony cannot be built around evidence. Why not? Two further ideas:
 1. It is incompatible with the idea that *true communication* is a source of knowledge.
 2. (Possibly equivalently?) It entails that knowledge from testimony depends on speaker and listener being in *disharmony* with one another.

Objections

- Two objections appear against this, from Jennifer Lackey and Arnon Keren:

1. Lackey (2008) asks why this is an *epistemic* problem, as opposed to a merely pragmatic one?
2. Keren (2012) points out that there are cases in which the recognition of evidence as having these properties does not always undermine its status.

Replies

- These arguments can be met.
 - In response to Lackey’s objection, the point can be put in terms of *defeat*. Once I recognise that something taken to be evidence is produced in this way, I come to regard it differently. If I don’t, then my epistemic grounds are defeated.
 - In response to Keren’s case, the example is one that is taken to be unlike telling. Even if the discovery does not undermine it in this case, there is reason to think that it does in a case of telling.

Conclusions

- I think there are two notions of evidence going on here:
 - The *broad sense*—*E* is evidence of *H* just in case $P(H/E)$ is ‘sufficiently high’.
 - The *narrow sense*—*E* is evidence of *H* just in case $P(H/E)$ is ‘sufficiently high’ in virtue of natural laws or other such nomological considerations.
- Ross and Moran show that testimony is not evidence in the narrow sense. Lackey and Keren show that it is evidence in the broad sense.
- Which is *the* sense of evidence? I’m pessimistic about the prospects for sorting this out...

Memory and Evidence

- Memories come in four basic varieties:

	Linguistic	Non-Linguistic
Unforgettable	<i>The fact that England won the World Cup in 1966.</i>	<i>The look of the sunset over the Golden Gate Bridge.</i>
Committed	<i>The items on a shopping list.</i>	<i>The appearance of the burglar as she ran away.</i>

A Question

- *Do apparent memories have the same evidential status as testimony?*
- A tentative answer:
 - Yes. Memories produced through committing something to memory have the same distinctive character as testimony in a case of telling.
 - Memories produced involuntarily have the same status as testimony that is not produced freely.
- What about cases in which someone remembers something deliberately *guided by the facts*?
 - This is just similar to sincere testimony.

References

Keren, Arnon. 2012. "On the Alleged Perversity of the Evidential View of Testimony." *Analysis* 72:700–707.

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