

The Space of Other People's
Reasons: John McDowell's
Reductionist Epistemology of
Testimony

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Here's the idea

- John McDowell's epistemological theory of testimony is usually construed as a paradigm anti-reductionist theory.
- I'll suggest that McDowell's distinctive epistemological commitments blur the distinction.
- The result is that there is as much of a case for reading McDowell's theory as a paradigm reductionist theory.

The Epistemology of Testimony

- Two questions:
- *Which* beliefs based on testimony are justified?
- *What* justifies such beliefs?

Reductionism

- Traditionally, theories are divided into *reductionist* and *anti-reductionist* theories.
- Exactly what these theories amount to is a source of disagreement.
- Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that Hume's theory is a reductionist one.

More Reductionism

- (Some) reductionist theories claim that:

(R1) A listener's belief in what a speaker says is justified by the listener's reasons for thinking the speaker's testimony is true.

(R2) A listener's belief in what a speaker says just when she has the kind of reasons described in (R1).

What (exactly) is Reductionism?

- Some hold that (R1) is constitutive of reductionism.
- Others hold that (R2) is constitutive of reductionism.
- And some hold that reductionism requires the *conjunction* of (R1) and (R2).

Anti-Reductionism

- The disagreement about reductionism yields a corresponding disagreement about anti-reductionism.
- Nonetheless the following is anti-reductionist:

(A1) A listener's belief in what a speaker says can be justified by a speaker's justification being *transmitted* to the listener.

(A2) A listener can acquire such justification without reasons for thinking the speaker's testimony is true.

McDowell's Theory of Knowledge

- McDowell tries to reconcile two intuitions.
- The first is an *infallibilist* intuition.
- The second is an *internalist* intuition.

McDowell's Theory of Testimony

- This would seem to yield a reductionist theory.
- The internalist claim that justification is a matter of having the right reasons seems to fit with (R1) and (R2).
- But nobody thinks McDowell's theory is reductionist.

McDowell and (A1)

- McDowell holds that a listener's belief being knowledge depends on the speaker expressing knowledge.
- '[I]f 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' (McDowell, 1994, p. 212).
- This is expressed in terms of with *states of informedness*.
- McDowell thus distinguishes between *hearing from a speaker* and *hearing a speaker say*.

Wait a minute!

- Isn't the idea of transmission externalist?
- A listener might be unaware of whether or not the speaker is expressing knowledge.
- If this is what matters, it seems that what justifies beliefs goes beyond what is internal.

What is Internal?

- Accessibilism– the view that internal = what you have access to.
- Mentalism– the view that internal = facts about your mental life.
- McDowell goes accessibilist.

Reflective Access

- Ordinarily, accessibilists think that access depends on you not begging the question.
- McDowell disagrees, holding that question-begging reasons are just as much a part of your epistemic armoury.
- Just like it is in the case of perception.

McDowell and (A2)

- One way of defending (A2) is by arguing that we are *entitled* to believe things.
- An entitlement gives us a right (or warrant) to presume testimony true if it appears to be.
- And McDowell does make reference to such entitlements.

Wait a(nother) minute!

- Isn't the idea of an entitlement externalist?
- The point of entitlements is that they explain how we know things *without* internalist factors.
- But McDowell has a different conception of entitlements.

McDowellian Entitlements

- According to McDowell, someone is entitled by the fact that a fact is made available to her.

‘Someone who can truly make a claim of that [factive] form has an entitlement, incompatible with any possibility of falsehood, to a claim whose content is given by the embedded proposition. The entitlement consists in the visual availability to her of the fact she would affirm in making that claim’ (McDowell, 2002, p. 98).

- But this is just the kind of thing that supports a *reason* (on McDowell’s view).
- So one is entitled just when one has a reason (*contra* Burge).

Applied to testimony

- McDowell states that a listener *can* be entitled to her belief in what the speaker says.
- But he also says this:

‘I think the tourist is entitled to his belief about where the cathedral is [...] **BUT I DO NOT THINK THAT IS BECAUSE HE IS EXERCISING A GENERAL PRESUMPTION OF SINCERITY AND COMPETENCE**’ (McDowell, 1994a, p. 218 n. 211).

- Rather, it is the *reason* that explains the knowledge.

Summary

- Talk of transmission is, in McDowell's hands, neutral.
- This is because of McDowell's account of the domain of the internal.
- Talk of transmission is, in McDowell's hands, not an endorsement of (A2).
- This is because an entitlement does not provide a listener with a right to presume anything.