

Review: Benjamin McMyler: *Testimony, Trust, and Authority**

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An epistemological theory of testimony seeks to explain how it is that a listener believing that p as a result of accepting a speaker's testimony that p can result in the listener having a belief that enjoys a positive epistemic status. Recently, one type of theory has focused on the interpersonal nature of conversations in which the speaker *tells* a listener that p and the listener *trusts* the speaker. The claim is that the interpersonal character of this relationship plays an irreducible role in answering the question about how beliefs based on the acceptance of a speaker's testimony can enjoy any positive epistemic status.

In *Testimony, Trust, and Authority*, Benjamin McMyler seeks to defend an interpersonal theory of testimony. McMyler argues that when a listener trusts a speaker to tell the truth, this provides the listener with an epistemic reason for thinking that the speaker is telling the truth. The listener's belief enjoys its justificatory status because in being told that p the listener acquires an epistemic right of deferral, the upshot of which is that the speaker's own justification for p comes to justify the listener's belief that p . When a speaker tells a listener that p and the listener trusts the speaker, according to McMyler's view this results in the epistemic work in justifying the listener's belief being shared between the speaker and the listener.

Forming beliefs by trusting a speaker is a distinctive way of coming to believe. From this observation, McMyler moves to the thought that when acquiring beliefs in this way comes to result in knowledge, this knowledge is similarly distinctive. McMyler expresses this distinctiveness in terms of

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the idea that the knowledge is distinctively *secondhand*. Knowledge counts as secondhand, on McMyler's view just when the knowing individual, upon being asked for reasons, is disposed to make an appeal to the authority of the speaker – by saying that the speaker told her so. When the listener is disposed to deploy an argument for p in defence of p , rather than appeal to the speaker as an authority, the listener's knowledge that p does not have the distinctively secondhand character McMyler associates with testimonial justification (p. 57).

The observation that testimonial knowledge has this distinctive secondhand quality forms the basis for McMyler's attack on traditional *reductionist* and *anti-reductionist* theories. The argument is that since reductionist theories align the factors that confer testimonial justification with the factors that justify a listener's inference from the fact that a speaker said that p to the conclusion that the speaker is telling the truth, reductionism cannot account for the secondhand nature of testimonial justification. McMyler thus concludes that reductionism is not sensitive to the distinction between acquiring knowledge that p by treating a speaker as an authority and acquiring knowledge that p understanding a speaker's argument to the conclusion that p (p. 76).

McMyler goes on to argue that anti-reductionist theories also face problems in accounting for the secondhand nature of testimonial knowledge. Since anti-reductionist theories associated testimonial justification with a listener's comprehension of a speaker's statement, McMyler suggests that it is still mysterious how the question of a speaker's authority – the consideration that drives the idea that testimonial knowledge is secondhand – can bear on the justificatory status of a listener's belief formed through accepting the speaker's testimony (p. 60). This is because aligning justification with comprehension seems to align justification with factors exclusively to do with the listener. The result, according to McMyler, is that neither reductionism nor anti-reductionism can give an adequate account of the way in which testimonial knowledge is distinctively secondhand knowledge.

In place of these theories, McMyler claims that telling offers a listener an *epistemic right of deferral*. This means that the speaker assumes an epistemic responsibility for the listener's belief, as long as the listener trusts the speaker. In the event of someone challenging the listener's belief, the epistemic right of deferral permits the listener to simply pass (defer) the challenge on to the speaker. In this way, the question of whether or not the listener's belief enjoys testimonial justification depends on the speaker being able to meet

the associated challenge (p. 63).

The supporting argument for this claim draws on the idea that a speaker can seek to inform a listener that p without telling her that p . A speaker might, for example state that she thinks that p is the case, or that she takes it that p is the case. This type of speech act McMyler calls merely *declaring a belief*. Insofar as we think that there is an important distinction between telling a listener that p and merely declaring one's belief that p it seems like this is explained in the way that telling someone that p involves openly offering to take responsibility for the resultant belief, where merely declaring one's belief does not (p. 68-9).

On the face of it, there seems to be little to distinguish McMyler's theory from other interpersonal theories. Most notably, the idea that the speaker telling a listener that p offers the listener a reason to believe the speaker can be found in Richard Moran's (2005) paper. Whilst the similarities are acknowledged by McMyler, he carefully distinguishes at least two significant ways in which his theory seeks to improve upon the one offered by Moran. The first involves the idea that being addressed, rather than merely overhearing is epistemically significant and the second involves the distinction between a right of complaint and a right of deferral.

McMyler argues that his theory, unlike Moran's can accommodate the thought that there is something distinctive in being told that p rather than merely overhearing a speaker say that p . Moran's view, according to McMyler is that someone who merely overhears a speaker say that p can acquire the distinctively testimonial knowledge associated with telling someone that p (p. 106 n.22). According to McMyler's theory, the idea is that the distinctive reason to believe is presented only to the intended audience, whereas for Moran it can be acquired by someone who merely overhears the speaker.

The second point of division concerns how a listener who believes that p by trusting a speaker who told her that p is within her epistemic rights to behave. According to Moran, the listener can justly complain if the speaker's statement that p turns out to have been unfounded. McMyler expresses the listener's epistemic right in terms of a right of deferral. Whilst this may look like two halves of the same walnut, McMyler urges that this point of departure has genuine epistemic significance. The idea is that whilst the right of complaint that Moran considers is essentially analogous to the right of complaint associated with someone breaking a promise, the right of deferral has genuine epistemic import – it allows the listener to justly pass challenges for justification on to the speaker. This, in McMyler's view gives it an epistemic

import that is not enjoyed by a mere right of complaint (p. 101-2).

This explains one aspect of how a listener trusting a speaker can supply the listener with a belief that enjoys a positive epistemic status. It explains the factors that confer testimonial justification. By itself, however, this only amounts to half the story that an epistemology of testimony needs to tell. The other question concerns the circumstances under which a listener's belief enjoys testimonial justification. According to McMyler, a listener requires a positive reason to think that a speaker is telling the truth. Furthermore, this reason must be a justifying reason. In short, the listener's belief that the speaker is telling the truth must be justified in order for the listener to acquire testimonial justification. Central to McMyler's theory is the claim that trusting a speaker can supply a listener with a sufficient justifying reason. It is this that makes McMyler's interpersonal theory different to the one that Edward Hinchman (2005) describes, since Hinchman argues that a listener acquires an *entitlement* rather than a reason to believe what the speaker says.

In order to spell this out more clearly, McMyler presents his own account of what it is to trust a speaker. Trusting a speaker to tell the truth is, on McMyler's view, to be differentiated from trusting *that* a speaker will tell the truth. Whilst McMyler thinks that both types of trust involve believing that the speaker will tell the truth, trusting a speaker to tell this truth involves this belief being justified in a distinctive way. Specifically, the belief is to be justified by the fact that the speaker told the listener. This fact confers justification on the listener's belief in virtue of the fact that telling involves the speaker taking responsibility for the listener's belief (p. 136). It is thus the existing relationship between the trustee and the trusting person that serves to justify the belief associated with trusting the speaker.

McMyler's book offers some interesting observations and thought provoking discussions. In essence, it has two main aims. The first is to show that theories of testimony that deny that the interpersonal relationship associated with a speaker telling the listener and the listener trusting the speaker fail to adequately account for the nature of testimonial knowledge. The second involves spelling out a theory that accommodates the distinctively interpersonal relationships in the right way *contra* existing interpersonal theories. One might wonder, however, whether McMyler's rejection of competing theories is entirely conclusive. Specifically, there might be more to be said for both Moran's theory and anti-reductionist theories in general.

In the discussion of reductionism and anti-reductionism McMyler presents,

the debate is staged as essentially a debate about which factors confer testimonial justification, which seems correct. Reductionism is cast as the idea that this depends on a listener's ability to infer the truth of p from the fact that a speaker said that p and this also seems correct. McMyler then goes on to characterise anti-reductionism as the view that it is a listener's comprehension of the speaker's statement that confers testimonial justification. This is not true of anti-reductionism *tout court*, though it is true of Peter Graham's (2006) theory that McMyler considers representative of anti-reductionism. Anti-reductionists such as Tyler Burge (1993) hold that testimonial justification involves a speaker's justification being *transmitted* to a listener – in line with what McMyler calls the *inheritance model* (p. 91).

One might therefore wonder why anti-reductionism cannot make sense of the idea that testimonial justification is distinctively secondhand. It would seem that Burge's theory involves the speaker's justification conferring testimonial justification on the listener's belief in broadly the same way that McMyler's theory does. There is still the disagreement over whether the listener inherits the speaker's justification, or whether the interpersonal relationship serves to justify the listener's belief, but it seems that anti-reductionist theories in themselves are able to account for the way in which testimonial knowledge seems to be distinctively secondhand.

In defence of Moran's theory, one might think that the right of complaint Moran describes does in fact have the epistemic import of McMyler's right of deferral. The first thing to note is that it seems to manifest itself in just the same cases – cases where a speaker is called upon to back up her statement. One might think that a right of complaint presupposes a right of deferral. If the listener did not have the right to defer to the speaker, it is hard to see how she could still have the right to complain if the speaker was unable to defend her statement. If the listener's deferral was illegitimate, it seems that her right of complaint would likewise be illegitimate. The result is that a right of complaint seems to presuppose a right of deferral and any epistemic import that comes with it.

Indeed one might seek to go further and question whether or not merely being within one's right to defer to the speaker has any epistemic import attached. If a listener is merely allowed to defer to the speaker but not allowed to complain if the speaker's statement is ill-supported, then it is questionable how this right of deferral could be an epistemic reason to believe the speaker. Simply being able to defer without holding the speaker to her statement by complaining or something more does not seem to be the kind of

thing that can supply a reason for believing the speaker. The result is that it seems that Moran's right of complaint might even have an epistemic significance that McMyler's right of deferral does not.

Ultimately, what *Testimony, Trust, and Authority* offers is a sophisticated interpersonal theory of testimony. It is informed by the latest discussions in the field and situated against a background of the historical debate – the discussion of which is, in my view, a real highlight of the book and one of the best in the literature although I have not had time to discuss it in detail. Much of McMyler's argumentation is supported by considerations he takes to be intuitive. This in itself is nothing new in the field and in the majority of cases I found that my intuitions were with his, particularly with respect to the considerations that he takes to undermine reductionist theories. This point notwithstanding, I am not sure that the intuitions he appeals to will prove deep-seated enough to dissuade defenders of competing theories. My hope is that *Testimony, Trust, and Authority* gets sufficient attention to enable me to find out. It deserves to.

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