

REVIEW: TESTIMONY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION BY JOSEPH SHIEBER

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There is a lot to recommend about Shieber's *Testimony: a Philosophical Introduction*. It is historically sensitive, with some excellent discussions of the history of the epistemology of testimony. The discussion of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a particularly good example of this. There are also some really interesting case studies that illustrate, beyond what one usually finds in discussions of the epistemology of testimony, the extent of our everyday epistemic dependence on testimony. Whilst it advertizes itself as an introduction, I think that this book is best thought of as a philosophical treatise, rather than an introductory textbook. And *qua* philosophical treatise, it is very good. It is full of intriguing ideas and invites serious philosophical discussion.

One thing that I think quite revealing regarding the book's *telos* is that, in the section entitled 'The Aim of this Book' (Section 1.2), Shieber does not cite any ambitions one might associate with an introduction. There is no stated ambition to introduce central ideas, or facilitate familiarity with particular puzzles, or to develop understanding of historical figures. Rather, Shieber characterizes the aim of the book in terms of developing an epistemological theory of testimony, in much the same way that someone writing a philosophical treatise on the epistemology of testimony might. In doing so, Shieber places three constraints: the *Existence Constraint*, the *Explanatory Constraint*, and the *Psychological Realism Constraint*.

The first and last of these are particularly significant. The Existence Constraint is the following:

Generally, when people believe on the basis of testimony, they are doing so appropriately (p. 7).

The Psychological Realism Constraint is the following:

The reasoning, or other computational processes that make it the case that a person's acceptance of testimony is appropriate must be the kinds of reasoning or processes that human recipients of testimony actually employ or approximate (pp. 7–8).

The Psychological Realism Constraint leads Shieber into a discussion of what the evidence from social psychology actually shows about how listeners respond to testimony. The discussion here is interesting and strikingly similar to Shieber's previously published work on the subject (furthering the case for thinking of the book as a philosophical treatise, rather than an introductory volume). According to Shieber, the evidence from social psychology shows that, whilst human beings might monitor speakers for signs of truth and/or falsity in their statements, their doing so does not actually make them able to distinguish between true and false statements in a reliable way.

Shieber argues that this is problematic for theories that emphasize the importance of testimonial monitoring. These are typically classified as reductionist approaches (though Shieber largely stays away from the terminology of ‘reductionism’ and ‘anti-reductionism’ in the discussion). Shieber states that the evidence from social psychology indicates that such theories lead to a problematic form of scepticism. Since such scepticism is implausible, Shieber maintains that the evidence from social psychology undermines theories that emphasize the importance of testimonial monitoring.

This part of the discussion is, I think, particularly important. Discussions in the epistemology of testimony typically exhibit nowhere near the depth of understanding of the evidence from social psychology that Shieber manifests and Shieber’s use of it is interesting. I think, however, that those who are committed to the importance of monitoring in the epistemology of testimony might find Shieber’s use of the evidence from social psychology unconvincing here.

If Shieber is correct, then the evidence from social psychology shows that monitoring is less reliable than those who emphasize its importance commonly assume. This discovery leaves two options. One can either drop the view that monitoring is so important, or one can be sceptical about knowledge from testimony. The sceptical option, Shieber rules out immediately. Here is why:

It is universally accepted that testimony is, at least sometimes, a source of good evidence. And [...] redressing real-world problems often depends on acting on the basis of testimonial evidence, and thus treating such evidence to justify action. Given this, scepticism about testimonial evidence simply isn’t a live option (p. 35).

Whilst this is essentially a restatement of the Existence Constraint, I find this motivation unconvincing. Whilst it is true that most epistemologists think that testimony is a source of knowledge (or good evidence), most also overestimate the reliability of the monitoring processes that take place in listeners. And it seems highly possible that those judgements might be related. It might be that many epistemologists are anti-sceptical about testimony *exactly because* they estimate that listeners can monitor for signs of truth and/or falsity in a reliable way. Once the evidence from social psychology undermines the latter claim, they might argue, the intuition supporting the former claim subsides as well.

Consider a perceptual analogy. Suppose that someone managed to convince you, to your satisfaction, that the representations of the world given to you in perception were in fact not reliable. There are two responses you might have here. One would be to endorse scepticism about your perceptual faculties. Another would be to insist that your perceptual faculties must provide you with knowledge of the external world in some way that does not depend on their reliability.

It seems clear enough that you ought to take the first option. But this is so even though the same considerations adduced by Shieber against testimonial scepticism apply equally well here. Most philosophers think that our perceptual faculties do, somehow, yield knowledge and our acting as though they do so seems to be an inevitable feature of our daily lives. So these considerations, by themselves, cannot render scepticism about testimony completely out of the question. It might mean that we need a particularly surprising discovery to push us towards it. But isn’t the evidence from social psychology cited by Shieber such a discovery?

Those who endorse the importance of monitoring in the epistemology of testimony might maintain that it is. In response Shieber might maintain that it is not. At this

point, however, more needs to be said about why those who endorse the importance of monitoring are mistaken. And whatever is deployed in support of this claim will, by itself, amount to an argument against theories that emphasize the importance of monitoring. The result is that the evidence from social psychology that Shieber cites not only does not add up to a conclusive argument against monitoring theories—it does not amount to even a partial argument against them.

Obviously, there is much more to say here. But the point is not that Shieber's discussion is misguided. Maybe it is, or maybe it is not. Either way, the point is that, as I stated at the outset, it invites serious philosophical discussion.

Shieber's book exhibits some features of an introductory volume. It is clearly written, it is extensive in its coverage and it tries to bring out what is at stake in the epistemology of testimony without bewildering terminology. But those are features of good philosophical writing in general, rather than distinctive features of an introductory book. On the other hand, it is built around constraints on an epistemological theory of testimony that I think are controversial and it develops interesting and distinctive arguments from them. Those features are distinctive to a treatise concerning the epistemology of testimony, rather than an introduction to it.