

# Understanding the Epistemic Value of Testimony

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## 1 Introduction

How should we understand the epistemic value of testimony?

One way is appeals to the idea of testimony as *evidence* of what is said. There are two questions here:

The Ontological Question: *Is testimony evidence of what is said?*

The Epistemological Question: *Can we treat testimony as evidence of what is said?*

## 2 The Problem

Moran's (2005) argument:

- (1) If testimony is evidence of what is said, then it is so because of the fact that it is intentionally produced.
- (2) Having an intentional character is parasitic on something counting as evidence.

Therefore

- (3) Testimony is not evidence.

In support of (1) it is worth observing that finding out that someone is making random assertions means we stop treating them as evidence.

In support of (2) it seems that finding that I intentionally planted your handkerchief at the scene of a crime destroys its status as evidence (both in the ontological

sense and the epistemological sense).

Traditional theories of testimonial justification involve a listener treating a speaker's testimony as evidence of what she says.

Reductionist Theories do this with an internalist conception of evidence.

Anti-Reductionist Theories do this with an externalist notion.

### 3 Intentions and Evidence

What does Moran's argument show?

- It doesn't show that testimony is not evidence of anything.  
For one thing, my testimony is surely evidence of the fact that I'm capable of producing testimony.
- It doesn't show that testimony is not evidence of what is said.  
An intentional character doesn't prevent this, regardless of whether or not we think of evidence in internalist or externalist terms.
- It doesn't show that the fact that something has an intentional character prevents it from being evidence.  
Similar to the above suggestion, but also worth considering smoke and fire.
- It might show that there is something wrongheaded about treating testimony as evidence of what is said.  
A speaker's testimony can be evidence, but treating it as such is problematic.

### 4 Science and Epistemology

Hardwig (1985; 1991) and Adler (1994) discuss cases concerning scientists who might actively distrust each other but have to work together on collaborative projects.

Their testimony is surely good evidence of what they say, even though it has the intentional character that Moran worries about.

It might also be the case that neither scientist trusts the other (or actively distrust each other).

Nonetheless, they might treat each other's testimony as evidence of what they say – and this seems relatively unproblematic.

So this seems to be a case in which speakers produce testimony intentionally, to inform, but the listeners quite properly respond by treating what they say as evidence.

Might it be the case that scientific inquiry works under unusual constraints and these are responsible for maintaining the evidential value of testimony?

Yes, but it's not so clear that there aren't similar constraints (in the form of norms governing trust and trustworthiness) in ordinary societies.

## 5 A Higher Level?

Might Moran's point be supposed to operate at a higher level – as a claim about testimony in abstraction from contingent norms?

Against this, though, there's the *Argument from Cooperation* from Faulkner (2011).

It's not so clear that considering testimony at this level of abstraction we're able to form justified beliefs from testimony without using the kinds of reasons that would involve treating testimony as evidence.

Only when background constraints are in place is it appropriate to trust... but this is just to say when treating it as evidence is appropriate.

## 6 Conclusions

- The fact that testimony has an intentional character does not mean either that it is not evidence, nor that it cannot be evidence of what is said.

- There are various accounts of contingent facts that can make testimony evidence of what is said and can make it appropriate to treat testimony as evidence of what is said.
- In the absence of these facts, it isn't clear that testimony has any epistemic value at all.

## References

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