

SOSA ON KNOWLEDGE FROM TESTIMONY

STEPHEN WRIGHT

ABSTRACT. Ernest Sosa has recently argued the knowledge we get from instruments and the knowledge we get from testimony is similar in important ways. Most importantly, the justification that supports it is similar in kind—both instrumental justification and justification from testimony is to be understood in terms of reliability. I argue that Sosa’s theory is problematic. Specifically, I argue that we can take certain attitudes towards people that we cannot coherently take towards instruments. This, I argue, grounds a distinction between the kind of justification that testimony can make available and the kind of justification that instruments can make available. The result is that reliability cannot provide a complete explanation of the justification that testimony makes available.

1. INTRODUCTION

One way of knowing things about the world is by using instruments. Another way is from testimony. Ernest Sosa (2010) has recently argued that the kind of knowledge we get from testimony is the same kind of knowledge that we get from instruments. In both cases, where we come to know something, our belief is supported by the reliability of the deliverance from the source of that belief. The idea is that instruments yield reliable outputs by being situated such that they would not easily provide incorrect deliverances and the same is true of people, who use testimony to express their beliefs and when doing so would not easily provide incorrect deliverances, listeners can know things by believing what speakers say.

In this paper, I will argue that Sosa’s conception of knowledge from testimony is incomplete. I agree that listeners *can* rely on speakers in the same way that they rely on instruments. I agree that they can thereby form knowledge that is supported by reliability as Sosa identifies with knowledge from instruments. And I agree that it may well be the case that people *do* behave in this way. I do not agree, however, that this model can give a *full* account of knowledge from testimony. I argue that there are ways in which a listener can respond to a speaker’s testimony that are not analogous to relying on instruments. Sosa’s theory thus gives an incomplete account of how we can respond to testimony and an incomplete account of the knowledge that testimony provides follows from this.

2. SOSA ON TESTIMONY AND INSTRUMENTS

Sosa’s theory of knowledge from testimony and instruments is grounded in *reliability* or, more precisely *safety*. When you know that it is 14°C because the thermometer reads 14°C, what makes your true belief knowledge, according to Sosa, is the fact that the thermometer’s reading would not easily have been false. More generally, Sosa states that:

Thanks to Paul Faulkner and Miranda Fricker.

A deliverance of a proposition by an instrument is epistemically reliable only if that proposition belongs to a field, and that instrument is so constituted and situated, that not easily would it then deliver any falsehood in that field (Sosa, 2010, p. 129).

Importantly, your belief that it is 14°C need not be based on any background beliefs you have about thermometers (including this one). Rather, you can simply *assume* that the instrument in question is reliable. According to Sosa:

Take the gauges that we face as driver of a late-model car. Most of us have a paltry conception of them as little more than screens, displays, that keep us informed about the amount of fuel in our tank, our speed, the rpm of our motor, etc. We take the display to be part of a fuller instrument that reliably delivers its deliverances. But who knows how the display on our dashboard reliably connects with its relevant subject matter? Our conception hardly extends beyond the distinctive screen or display (Sosa, 2010, p. 131).

We thus do not need background beliefs about the reliability of instruments to come to know things by believing their deliverances, according to Sosa. We can simply presume that they are reliable and our beliefs in their deliverances thus come to be knowledge because the instrument is such that it would not easily have yielded false deliverances.

This model of instrumental knowledge grounds Sosa's theory of knowledge from testimony. In Sosa's words:

Interpretive knowledge of what a speaker thinks (says) is thus instrumental knowledge that uses the instrument of language. Language is a double-sided instrument serving both speaker and audience. Hearers rely on the systematic safety of the relevant deliverances. Not easily would the speaker's utterance deliver that the speaker thinks (says) that such and such without the speaker's indeed thinking (saying) that such and such (Sosa, 2010, p. 135).¹

As with looking at a thermometer, you can come to know that it is 14°C on the basis of my telling you that it is because I would not easily have said something false. Again, your knowing does not depend on your having established the reliability of my testimony. Sosa observes that:

Speakers do not speak just about what they think. On the default assumption, however, which must be that of sincerity, as is known to both speaker and audience, the speaker's utterance does give to understand what the speaker thinks. So the utterance carries a deliverance as to the speaker's mind, as well as any deliverance it may deliver as to its more direct subject matter (Sosa, 2010, pp. 135-136).²

Sosa thus offers a theory that takes knowledge from testimony to be similar in kind to knowledge from instruments. Obviously, a fuel gauge works differently to a person and Sosa is not insensitive to this, but *qua* sources of knowledge, they are essentially similar. We rely on people like we rely on instruments and our knowledge from

¹This model of what justifies beliefs based on testimony is similar to Jennifer Lackey's (2008) account.

²In presenting sincerity as a *default assumption*, Sosa disagrees with Lackey, siding with Tyler Burge (1993) and C.A.J. Coody (1992).

testimony is supported by the reliability of my testimony, like our knowledge from instruments is supported by the reliability of their deliverances. thereby form beliefs that are justified and amount to knowledge in the same way, in virtue of the reliability of the deliverances produced by these sources.

3. RELYING ON SPEAKERS

At the centre of Sosa's theory is the idea that we treat speakers and instruments in the same way in basing our beliefs on them. In both cases, Sosa maintains, we rely on the source of information and our belief is thus grounded in the reliability of that source's outputs. According to Sosa '[i]n thus *relying* we make manifest our assumption of *reliability*' (Sosa, 2010, p. 131). One might think that the fact that we respond in the same way explains why our beliefs are justified in the same way. The fact that we *rely* on the testimony of speakers means that our belief is based on (and therefore justified by) the reliability of the speakers' testimony.

As observed in the introduction, I do not doubt that, as a point of fact, we *do* respond to speakers telling us things in this way and I do not doubt that, when we do, the justification that supports our beliefs is a matter of how easily the speaker might have said something false. I do doubt, however, that this is the *only* way we can respond to a speaker's testimony. I think that we can respond to speakers in ways in which we cannot (coherently) respond to instruments. Correspondingly, beliefs based on testimony can be justified in ways different to beliefs based on instruments, contrary to Sosa's theory.

The first thing to observe is that testimony comes from speakers that have doxastic states that instruments lack. Speakers *know* things, where instruments do not.³ Speakers thus have justified beliefs where instruments do not. This supports the claim that there are certain attitudes that we can coherently take in response to testimony that we cannot coherently take in response to an instrument.

In responding to a speaker's testimony, you assume the reliability of the speaker's testimony, as Sosa describes, or (I suggest) you assume that the speaker has justification for what she says. You might thereby seek to base your belief *either* on the reliability of the speaker's testimony, *or* on the speaker's justification for what she says.⁴

Obviously, you can't seek to base your belief on an instrument's justification for its deliverance, since instruments are not the kinds of things that have justification. Beliefs based on testimony can thus be formed in ways that beliefs based on instruments cannot. The difference in how we respond to testimony has a significance for how beliefs based on testimony are justified, because the difference is explained in terms of the epistemic basing relation; in assuming that the speaker has justification for what she says, I seek to base my belief on that justification whereas in assuming the reliability of the speaker's testimony, I seek to base my belief on that reliability.

We thus have a second sort of justification that can support beliefs based on testimony. Beliefs based on testimony can be justified either by the reliability of

³Or if they do, then the sense in which they know things is different to the sense in which people know things (Sosa, 2010, p. 135). See also Sosa (1983).

⁴The literature on the difference between *trusting* and *relying* considers the idea that there are attitudes that we can coherently take towards other people that we cannot coherently take towards non-human machines. See Baier (1986), Holton (1994), Jones (1996), Pettit (1995) and Wright (2010). This has been extended to the epistemology of testimony by Faulkner (2011), Hinchman (2005), McMyler (2011) and Moran (2005).

the speaker's testimony, or by the speaker's justification *transmitted* to the listener.⁵ Sosa's account of justification from testimony needs to be supplemented with the claim that testimony can transmit justification from speaker to listener in a way that deliverances of instruments cannot. This is not to say that transmission theories give a complete picture either—it might well be that transmission theories need to allow justification in terms of reliability in order to make for a complete picture—that is another paper. But it is to say that justification transmission cannot be explained in terms of the reliability that Sosa identifies.

One might respond by saying that, even though seeking to base one's belief on the speaker's justification for what she says is different to seeking to base one's belief on the reliability of the speaker's testimony, seeking to base one's belief on the speaker's justification for what she says is just another way of relying on her. Assuming that the speaker's testimony expresses something she has justification for is (according to this response) a way of relying on her, not something different in kind to assuming the reliability of her testimony. It is therefore *not* clear that reliability cannot give a full account of knowledge from testimony.

Even if we allow this point, however, the point against Sosa's theory of testimony still goes through. The central point against Sosa's theory was that understanding an assumption of the reliability of the speaker's testimony and the fact of the reliability of that testimony cannot, by itself, give a full account of the knowledge that testimony provides. Whether or not we explain the assumption of the speaker's testimony as an expression of something she has justification for and the resulting acquired justification in terms of transmission, or in terms of more reliability, we are dealing with something different to the reliance that Sosa's theory identifies. And it is something with no analogue in instrumental knowledge.

4. CONCLUSION: THE POINT GENERALISES

In summary, I think that Sosa's picture of knowledge from instruments is probably correct. I don't, however, think that the same is true of the theory of testimony that Sosa tries to extract from it. The result is that I don't think that Sosa's attempt to align knowledge from testimony and knowledge from instruments is ultimately successful. This point generalises.

Specifically, it generalises in that I do not think that *any* theory of knowledge from instruments can translate neatly into a theory of knowledge from testimony. This is because there are attitudes that we take to people that we do not take towards instruments. Where we might make an assumption about a speaker's testimony, we might alternatively make an assumption about the speaker's knowledge. This latter assumption has no instrumental analogue. The assumption we make determines the character of the knowledge we acquire. Where assuming the reliability of a speaker's testimony connects us to the reliability of the speaker's testimony, assuming that the speaker has justification for what she says connects us up to the speaker's justification for what she says.⁶

⁵Burge (1993), Coady (1992) and Faulkner (2011) all defend transmission theories.

⁶Obviously, it will sometimes be the case that the speaker's testimony is reliable *because* she has justification for what she says, but Jennifer Lackey (2008) has shown that the reliability of the speaker's testimony and the speaker having justification for what she says are logically independent of one another.

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