

A HUMEAN ACCOUNT OF TESTIMONIAL JUSTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT: I argue that a Humean account can make sense of the phenomenology associated with testimonial justification; the phenomenology being that in standard cases hearers regularly simply accept a testifier's assertions as true – hearers don't engage in monitoring. The upshot is that a Humean account is in a better position dialectically than is usually supposed. I provide some background to the debate before setting out two challenges facing accounts of testimonial justification. The first challenge is to provide an account that accords with the phenomenology of testimonial reception; the second challenge is to provide an account that can make sense of some testimonial beliefs enjoying greater justification than others. I show the credulist position to be vulnerable to the second challenge and the Humean position to be vulnerable to the first challenge. I argue that a Humean account, by drawing on dual process theory, can overcome the first challenge.

KEYWORDS: David Hume, testimony, epistemic justification

Introduction

I take testimony to be “... the assertion of a declarative sentence by a speaker to a hearer or to an audience.”¹ I regard this as an approximation of what testimony is, but one that suffices for my purposes.² I further take it that not only is testimonial knowledge possible but that we are dependent on testimony for much of our knowledge. Following Adler, I describe this as the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis.³

¹ Jonathan Adler, “Epistemological Problems of Testimony,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2010 Edition), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/testimony-episprob/>>.

² Nevertheless it should be noted that testimony needn’t be in the form of spoken word and “audience” here shouldn’t be thought of as restricted to hearers. Testimony can, for example, be given in written form and sign language, and, might, be given by bodily movements with communicative potential such as pointing, winking, etc., in the appropriate contexts as Lackey argues. Jennifer Lackey, *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), *Oxford Scholarship Online*, Accessed March 17th 2011, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199219162.001.0001>>, 25–26.

³ Adler, “Epistemological Problems of Testimony.”

At first glance, the mere idea that we can gain knowledge from testimony might seem implausible, let alone the claim that we are dependent on testimony for much of our knowledge. A Cartesian way of thinking about knowledge lends itself to this thought. To elaborate, it might be thought that if even our perceptual beliefs are vulnerable to sceptical worries, then our beliefs dependent on the assertions of others are all the more vulnerable to sceptical worries. Knowledge, for the Cartesian, is reason based conviction which there can be no alternative reason for doubting; as doubts are removed, certainty increases.⁴ On this way of thinking of knowledge, it's very difficult to see how one can gain true beliefs with knowledge conducive epistemic justification from standard cases of testimony. If one attains knowledge, one's knowledge will be equipped to withstand any sceptical challenge; if one knows, one will be certain.⁵

The approach commonly taken in contemporary epistemology to the examination of the nature of knowledge is notably distinct from the methodology of doubt employed by Descartes for the same purpose. First, fallibilist accounts of knowledge are widely accepted within the field of epistemology, fallibilist in that we can know p even if our belief that p could, in a certain sense, have been wrong but isn't. More specifically, the justification of our belief may be such that it is possible that we could be wrong.⁶ Second, and relatedly, it's standard practice when examining the structure of knowledge in contemporary epistemology to assume that we do know more or less what we ordinarily take ourselves to know. Third, it's also standard practice to extrapolate from such cases of knowledge as well as hypothetical cases in which we would take ourselves to know, to build an account of the nature of knowledge.⁷

⁴ Lex Newman, "Descartes' Epistemology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2010 Edition), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/descartes-epistemology/>>.

⁵ For an early treatment of how testimonial belief fits in with certainty and what we would now call entitlement, see the writings of the much overlooked John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Elibron Classics, 2007). (Anthony Kenny, *Philosophy in the Modern World: A New History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30, in his history of Western philosophy, writes that Newman's is "... arguably the best treatment of the topics of belief and certainty between Hume and Wittgenstein.")

⁶ Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁷ Relevant to this discussion is Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973), in which it is argued to be problematic to build an account of knowledge both from what we take the extension of knowledge to be without already drawing on what we take the intension of knowledge to be and similarly to start from what we take the

This is not to say that there is a denial of the sceptical problem, rather responding to the sceptic is treated as an enterprise distinct from that of providing an account of the nature of knowledge. C. A. J. Coady for example distinguishes what he calls positive epistemology from negative epistemology.⁸ The former investigates the structure of knowledge or the body of beliefs that can reasonably be thought of as knowledge, and leaves sceptical worries aside; while the latter is concerned with the theoretical problems raised by scepticism.⁹ Greco, in like vein, distinguishes what he calls “the project of explanation,” which seeks to explain “what knowledge is and how knowledge is possible,” and “the project of vindication,” which is the project “of showing that we have knowledge.”¹⁰

Claiming that what follows falls within the realm of positive epistemology or the project of explanation doesn’t quite yet allow us to set sceptical worries with regard to testimonial knowledge to one side. After all, it might be thought that much of what we take ourselves to know doesn’t include, or at least not to any significant degree, testimonial beliefs in propositions. But given a little consideration this will surely seem mistaken.

My knowledge that Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world, that smoking can cause cancer, that there exist other planets in our solar system, that the French Revolution occurred, are all based on the testimony of others.¹¹ Not only is much of my knowledge of the broader world and its past based on testimony, but much of my knowledge of important facts about my own life and the lives of those around me is also based on testimony; my knowledge, for example, of my date of birth, the occupations of numerous friends and family members, and that, say, two of my friends holidayed in Italy last year, are each based on testimony. I take it that most of us are in a similar epistemic position and that therefore the much of what we take ourselves to know includes knowledge that comes from testimony. These examples suggest not only that much of what

intension of knowledge to be without already drawing on what we take the extension of knowledge to be.

⁸ C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

⁹ Confusingly, “positive epistemology” and “negative epistemology” are used in a different sense in some of the literature. For example, an alternative use of “positive epistemology” is one that describes an epistemology that assumes the negation of sceptical premises and considers why the original premises should be denied. William G. Lycan, “Moore Against The New Skeptics,” *Philosophical Studies* 103 (2001): 44.

¹⁰ John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

¹¹ History as a subject is particularly dependent on testimony. Testimony seems to be the basic raw material or data of history as a discipline.

we take ourselves to know includes some testimonial knowledge but that the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis is true.

So far I have acknowledged that there might be resistance to treating testimonial knowledge as possible. I have explained that I will follow the contemporary epistemological approach of setting sceptical worries to one side and assume that we do know much of what we take ourselves to know. I have also countered the worry that, even if the contemporary epistemological approach is accepted, it might be objected that testimonial knowledge does not account for a significant portion of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know.

1. Testimonial Justification: Two Problems

I take an account of testimonial justification to face two challenges. The challenges, set out in question form, are as follows:

1. How can we account for testimonial justification in a way that accords with the phenomenology of testimonial reception?
2. What makes some testimonial beliefs more justified than other testimonial beliefs?

Relevant to addressing the first challenge is what Adler calls the Uniformity Claim; in standard cases hearers regularly simply accept a testifier's assertions as true.¹² I take this to be a claim about the phenomenology of testimonial reception as well as being an empirical claim; in other words I take the Uniformity Claim as also describing how testimonial reception is commonly experienced. A further claim that I take to be relevant to addressing the first question is that the testimony believed in such cases is ordinarily justified. The motivation for the latter claim is that ultimately we want an account of how testimonial justification accords with the phenomenology of testimonial reception in such a way that we can explain how the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis is the case. If both claims are indeed true then this would suggest that testimony carries its own justification; or, to put it another way, the fact that something is testified to ordinarily makes believing what has been testified justified, rather than testimony being justified at the expense of some reasoning process, say inference, on the part of the believer. Just as something visually seeming to be the case ordinarily makes believing what seems to be the case justified, so too with testimony; testimony that p ordinarily makes believing p justified.

¹² Adler, "Epistemological Problems of Testimony."

It does, however, seem intuitive to think that one recipient of testimony may be justified in her testimonial belief, while a fellow recipient may be less justified in believing what is said. To see this, consider the following case:

Jana tells her mother, who is a wise old judge, and her young child a fantastic tale of how, in the space of a fortnight, she lost most of her fortune, say when the stocks she had invested in crashed, and then regained a roughly equivalent fortune, say when other stocks she had invested in soared. Although her tale is fantastic, both the judge and the child believe her tale, the content of which is known by Jana and so is in fact true.

Even if they both believe the testimony, we should want an account of testimonial justification to allow for the possibility that the judge is more justified in her belief than the child is in his belief. Such a consideration suggests that the degree of justification enjoyed by a testimonial belief may vary from person to person.¹³

2. The Credulist Response

The works of Thomas Reid and David Hume have inspired rival contemporary accounts of testimonial justification. The Reidian or credulist view is that the Almighty intended us to be social beings and so made us with a “propensity to speak the truth” and with a disposition to believe what we are told by others.¹⁴ Given such a propensity and disposition, testimony is likely to be believed and testimony believed is likely to be true, making testimonial belief justified.

The contemporary credulist argument doesn’t make reference to God, but claims that adherence to the norm of assertion makes testimonial claims justified. Accounts claiming to articulate the norm of assertion set out the conditions in which it is regarded as appropriate to assert something. One account of the norm of assertion, is that the speaker can properly assert p, only if the speaker knows p.¹⁵ If this is right, then it looks like we’re on our way to answering the question as to what makes testimonial belief justified in a way that fits with the Uniformity Claim.

¹³ Similarly, we can imagine that the judge’s testimonial belief may be more justified in one situation and less so in one in which she has less experience and is less wise.

¹⁴ Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, eds. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 94-95.

¹⁵ From Adler, “Epistemological Problems of Testimony,” who cites Peter Unger, *Ignorance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1975) and Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

If there is widespread adherence to the knowledge norm of assertion, then if someone asserts p, then an audience is justified in believing p. Now we look to be in a good position to explain the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis while continuing to hold the Uniformity Claim. Simply believing what is said won't prevent the recipient of testimony from having a justified belief.

Now, however, we don't seem to be in a good position to answer the second question. Returning to the case of the judge and the child, if testimonial belief is justified because of the norm of assertion then it's not obvious how the judge might be more justified than the child. Relatedly, claiming that knowledge may be gained simply by believing what's testified seems to set the bar too low for knowledge. Elizabeth Fricker puts the worry about accounts of testimonial justification based on such a claim starkly when she writes that they are "... an epistemic charter for the gullible and undiscriminating."¹⁶ Fricker recommends that

... a hearer should always engage in some assessment of the speaker for trustworthiness. To believe what is asserted without doing so is to believe blindly, uncritically. This is gullibility.^{17, 18}

The credulist may warn that requiring such an assessment of testimonial justification discords with the Uniformity Claim, and risks ultimately leaving us unable to explain the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis. The credulist may claim that without foregoing an explanation of the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis, the credulist can adjust her account in an attempt to address the concerns raised. The credulist may do so by claiming that there should be "counterfactual sensitivity" to possible defeaters.¹⁹ If I ask for directions to the Sears Tower, now officially known as the Willis Tower, and would have believed the testifier, had he, gleam in eye, unsuccessfully attempted to muffle sniggers while giving directions, then I would be insensitive to what such behaviour normally indicates and not justified in my testimonial belief.

The natural question to ask is whether this move, which claims that counterfactual sensitivity rather than assessment is required, does not too go too far and discords with the uniformity principle. Miranda Fricker criticises this move on the basis that we are left with no explanation of how an agent would go

¹⁶ Elizabeth Fricker, "Against Gullibility," in *Knowing from Words: Western and Indian Philosophical Analysis of Understanding and Testimony*, eds. By Bimal K. Matilal and Arindam Chakrabarti (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 126.

¹⁷ Fricker, "Against Gullibility," 145.

¹⁸ Both quotes are cited in Adler, "Epistemological Problems of Testimony."

¹⁹ Adler, "Epistemological Problems of Testimony."

from simply accepting testimony to, when relevant, critically attending to justification relevant aspects of the testimony.²⁰ In order for there to be counterfactual sensitivity the worry is that there needs to be a kind of continuous assessment or monitoring; the thought being that only this can explain the possibility of noting a defeater and responding accordingly. But the credulist needn't be committed to such continuous assessment or monitoring in order for there to be counterfactual sensitivity. For example, a person may notice that another person's eyebrow has been shaved without requiring of the first person that he always be engaged in monitoring the eyebrows of the other person.

The picture of testimonial justification that emerges from this move is of testimonial justification being more complex than the original credulist idea of testimony carrying its own justification. Rather the picture we get is that testimony enjoys default or *prima facie* justification but that believing testimony alone isn't sufficient for justification, at least for knowledge conducive justification the agent's belief must have the outlined counterfactual sensitivity.

Even with these significant adjustments to the credulist account of testimonial justification with which we started out, it's not obvious that we are in a position to adequately address the second challenge of accounting for differing degrees of justification of testimonial belief, although we can account for one person having testimonial justification from a piece of testimony and another not having testimonial justification from the same piece of testimony. The addition of a simple counterfactual sensitivity condition does not seem sufficiently dynamic to capture the way in which we'd imagine there to be a wide range of factors of differing weights adding to and detracting from the degree of appropriate justification a belief in a piece of testimony enjoys. Putting the point differently, we're not yet better placed to say how the wise old judge might be justified in her testimonial belief to the n^{th} degree while another recipient of testimony may be less justified in his belief in the same piece of testimony.

3. The Humean Response

Hume also holds that much of our knowledge comes about via testimony.^{21, 22} In "On Miracles," he writes that belief in testimony is not due to an *a priori*

²⁰ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65-66.

²¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170.

²² Paul Faulkner, "David Hume's Reductionist Epistemology of Testimony," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998): 302-313, Duncan Pritchard, "The Epistemology of Testimony,"

connection “between testimony and reality” but is based on “the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses.”²³ There is no necessary connection between what is testified to and how the world is, but as it happens what is testified to usually does reflect how the world is. The level of justification that testimony enjoys is determined inductively; the more regularly facts and witness reports conform, the greater the justificatory weight of the testimony.

Hume doesn’t want to just say that induction shows there to usually be conformity between testimony and reality and that therefore we can just take testimony to be justified; rather he discusses considerations that have a bearing on the justificatory force of testimony. A benefit of this more fine-grained approach is that if we are justified in believing competing claims, two or more claims that can’t both or all be true, then we may be able to determine which of the claims is of greater justificatory force; something that we would be unable to do if we supposed testimony to be justified only on the basis of it being testimony. Similarly, if we have testimonial justification for believing p and we have non-testimonial justification for believing not p, then a more fine-grained account of testimonial justification may allow us to determine whether p or not p enjoys greater justification.

The considerations that Hume regards as significant when determining the justificatory force of testimony include; the presence of contrary testimony; the character of the testifiers; the number of testifiers; the manner in which the testimony is delivered; and the interests the testifiers have in the testimony being affirmed.²⁴ Another factor is the extraordinariness of the testimony for the recipient of the testimony. The more extraordinary the testimony to the experience of the recipient, the less the testimony should be credited; if, however, the testimony being false would be more extraordinary than the testimony being true, then the testimony should be believed to a degree justified by the remainder, the weight of evidence for p after the weight of evidence against p has been

Philosophical Issues 14 (2004): 327, footnote 6, and Axel Gelfert, “Hume on Testimony Revisited,” *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 13 (2010): 60-75 each question how Hume is standardly interpreted in this debate. How he has been standardly interpreted and challenges to that interpretation are not the concern of my paper. Mindful of these worries, however, in representing his views I stick to a close reading of his work and describe the view I find articulated there “Humean” rather than “reductionist” or “inferentialist.”

²³ Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 171.

²⁴ Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 171.

subtracted.²⁵ Hume's list is not exhaustive; he supposes there to be many such particulars.²⁶

That such particulars contribute to our evidence and so impact on the justificatory force of testimony is supported by induction. Believing ultimately that, excepting in cases of perceptual knowledge and memorial knowledge, we are dependent on experience for knowledge, and therefore also presumably for knowledge conducive justification, he holds that belief should be attuned to the experienced frequency of conjunctions of events in accordance with his evidential calculus.²⁷ The wise man's degree of belief will reflect this variability of evidential weight; he "proportions his belief to the evidence."²⁸

It appears that Hume is well-placed to explain how the judge can enjoy greater testimonial justification than the child; having more experience to draw on, she can potentially be more justified than the child. However, it seems natural to think that his account of testimonial knowledge discords with the Uniformity Claim. Requiring an agent to check with her experience in order to enjoy testimonial justification, at least consciously, isn't consistent with the claim that in standard cases of testimonial reception we simply accept testimony, and that we can have justified testimonial beliefs in those same cases.^{29,30}

Considering what Hume writes about testimony, it's not obvious why Hume should be taken to be committed to thinking that such checking is necessary. As long as agents do proportion their belief to the evidence, it's hard to see why actually checking with their experiences or not should matter for Hume. Of course the belief couldn't just be formed in a way that makes it so that it is only luckily proportioned to the evidence. An issue that arises is that even if it is correct that it doesn't matter to Hume's assessment of the force of an agent's doxastic justification whether they've actually checked or not, what does matter is

²⁵ Hume, *An Enquiry*, 172.

²⁶ Hume, *An Enquiry*, 171.

²⁷ Hume, *An Enquiry*, 110, 170.

²⁸ Hume, *An Enquiry*, 170. In his own work concerning human understanding, John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 697, makes a similar claim. He writes that the mark of a lover of truth is that he does not entertain "any Proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built upon will warrant."

²⁹ Hume, *An Enquiry*, 171, might challenge the uniformity thesis. He writes that frequently testimony is met with hesitation. However, I'll leave exploration of that possible challenge to one side as I believe it is not immediately crucial to the articulation of a promising Humean view of testimonial justification.

³⁰ See Coady, *Testimony*, for an example of this criticism of the Humean position.

that it would be unclear how it might happen that the agent's experience might inform their belief in the way that Hume thinks it should in the absence of actually checking. This is a problem given that we want to explain the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis in a way that fits with the Uniformity claim.

Psychological research suggests that it may be possible to explain how an agent's experience might inform their belief in a way that would be consistent with the uniformity claim. Dual process theorists argue for the claim that "there are two different modes of processing," sometimes described as system 1 and system 2, sometimes as sub-personal and personal.^{31, 32} System 1 processes are generally agreed to be "rapid, parallel and automatic in nature," while system 2 is taken to be "slow and sequential" and evolutionarily recent in comparison with system 1.³³ In a more recent work Evans adds that there seems to be widespread agreement that system 1 is unconscious and system 2 is effortful.³⁴ Given what we know about the two systems, though admittedly in the absence of any definitive experimental results, it seems plausible to expect that system 1 picks up on cues of differing strengths that support and cues that undermine belief in testimony. It further seems plausible that experience of testimonial reception can contribute to an agent being sensitive and appropriately responsive to cues and so enjoying greater justification when they believe a piece of testimony. It would follow from the relevant work being done by system 1 that an agent's experience of standard cases of testimonial reception would conform to the Uniformity Claim. If this is right then we have an explanation of testimonial justification that accords with the Uniformity Claim and goes some way towards explaining what makes some testimonial beliefs more justified than others. To see that this seems supported by the system 1/system 2 distinction, consider how Frankish describes the workings of the two systems thus:

[M]ost of our behaviour is generated without the involvement of personal reasoning. Think about the actions involved in such everyday activities as driving a car, holding a conversation, or playing sports. These are intelligent actions, which are responsive to our beliefs and desires (think of how beliefs about the rules of the game shape the actions of a football player), and a great

³¹ Jonathan St. B. T. Evans, "Dual-Processing Accounts of Reasoning, Judgement, and Social Cognition," *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (2008): 256.

³² Different authors have labelled the modes differently. Other labels for dual processes include experiential and rational, heuristic and systematic, intuitive and analytic, holistic and analytic. Evans, "Dual-Processing Accounts," 257.

³³ Jonathan St. B. T. Evans, "In Two Minds: Dual-Process Accounts of Reasoning," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7, 10 (2003): 454.

³⁴ Evans, "Dual-Processing Accounts," 270.

deal of complex mental processing must be involved in generating them. Yet, typically, they are performed spontaneously with no prior conscious thought or mental effort.³⁵

Nevertheless, even if there is a way for experience to act as an input into testimonial justification in a way that is consistent with the Uniformity Claim and the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis, such an input isn't quite adequate. An agent won't be more justified in her testimonial belief simply in virtue of that agent being more experienced. Our judge is old but she is also wise. Rather, what is required is that the testimonial recipient be virtuous in her beliefs, though experience plausibly does contributes to the overall virtuousness of the testimonial recipient.³⁶

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how a Humean view of testimonial knowledge may be articulated that incorporates attractive features of the credulist view with attractive features of a non-credulist view. In particular I've shown how this Humean view can overcome two related problems for accounts of testimonial justification. While challenges for the view remain, for example explaining how testimonial justification is possible in young children, this is a challenge also facing other leading accounts of testimonial justification.³⁷

³⁵ Keith Frankish, "Systems and Levels: Dual-system Theories and the Personal-Subpersonal Distinction," in *In Two Minds: Dual Processes and Beyond*, eds. Jonathan Evans and Keith Frankish (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89–107. Interestingly the approach based on dual process theory as outlined offers a way of seeing the counterfactual sensitivity credulist position and the Humean position as being much closer than the pair are usually represented as being.

³⁶ It's standard in virtue ethics to claim that experience is necessary for the practical wisdom that being morally virtuous requires. For example, see Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2012 Edition), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/ethics-virtue/>>.

³⁷ Thanks for comments and suggestions go to Christos Kyriakou and audiences at the *David Hume and Modern Philosophy* conference in Moscow and at a work in progress meeting at the University of Edinburgh. Special thanks go to Duncan Pritchard for his very helpful comments.