

THE ANIMAL OBJECTION TO REDUCTIVE ACCOUNTS OF TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT: The reductionist and anti-reductionist debate features prominently within the larger canon of literature devoted to the epistemology of testimony. Reductionism is the thesis, roughly, that testimonial knowledge is reducible to some other, more general, form(s) of knowledge. We take anti-reductionism's thesis to be the denial of reductionism. In this note, we develop an attempted counterexample to reductionism by way of discussing animal testimony. We don't mean to suggest that the reductionist is without a response to the counterexample proposed, but we think it's about time epistemologists start focusing on how broad we should understand testimony and to what degree, animals might guide our process in developing our epistemology of testimony.

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The reductionist and anti-reductionist debate features prominently within the larger canon of literature devoted to the epistemology of testimony. Reductionism is the thesis, roughly, that testimonial knowledge is reducible to some other, more general, form(s) of knowledge. To best tease out this idea, John Greco uses inductive knowledge as an example of a more general form of knowledge to which testimonial knowledge could be reducible to:

The idea here is that testimonial knowledge is just more inductive knowledge, distinguished only by the epistemically superficial fact that the induction concerns testimony and testifiers. For example, in testimonial knowledge we generalize from previous experience regarding what kind of testifiers are trustworthy, what kinds of conditions promote true testimony, etc.¹

Anti-reductionism, by contrast, is simply the denial of the reductionist thesis. Testimonial knowledge is not reducible to more general form(s) of knowledge. As Greco puts it, testimonial knowledge is "its own kind of thing" and cannot be reduced to something else."²

¹ Greco (2020, 7-8).

² Greco (2020, 8).

Greco argues (convincingly) that the reductionist v. anti-reductionist debate is more fine-grained than the picture painted above makes it seem.³ Nevertheless, for the purposes of this essay, we needn't get into the details, as these more general definitions are sufficient for the task at hand. Though it is important to point out that the sort of reductionism addressed below does, at least partly, reduce testimony to an inductive process.

In the literature, it is standard for non-reductionists to appeal to young children as counterexamples to reductionism. The idea is as follows: It's unlikely that young children, accept testimony that *p* based on inferences (e.g., inductive inferences). So, it isn't plausible to think that testimonial knowledge is reducible to the inductive process or some other nearby method of knowledge.

In response, reductionists have tried to mitigate the damage done by suggesting that young children might be able to meet the inferential conditions laid out by reductionist after all. For example, Jennifer Lackey appeals to literature that shows from the ages of 18 months and up, children possess the ability to reject and even correct false testimonial claims.⁴

It's here however, that we would like to offer up a further response to this reductionist move. We want to grant for the sake of argument that young children can formulate positive reasons for trusting a relevant testifier, even such reasons that are sufficient to enable their belief to count as knowledge. We think the evidence for this is scant but nonetheless, we concede. The reductionist will have to engage an even more troubling counterexample, however: animal testimonial knowledge. Before making our point, let's briefly define what we mean by testimony and show how it can be that animals do offer testimony to other animals and even humans.

Lackey provides a helpful survey of the spectrum of epistemological accounts of testimony on offer in the contemporary literature.⁵ That said, according to Lackey, all of these accounts seem to suffer from various problems, one of which is relevant for our purposes. Specifically, as Lackey writes, "in one form or another, all of the above proposals flesh out the notion of testimony in terms of *statements*...The thought underlying these views is that an instance of testimony is fundamentally a statement, either verbal or in writing, of a speaker's thoughts."⁶ Lackey provides various reasons for why framing one's account of testimony in terms of statements is problematic – the nod of one's head or the pointing of one's finger, for example,

³ Greco (2020, 7-18).

⁴ Lackey (2008, 218-219).

⁵ Lackey (2008, 13-36).

⁶ Lackey (2008, 25).

can convey information, and yet clearly aren't statements. As will become obvious below, there are other reasons to worry about accounts of testimony which are (solely) defined in terms of statements.

With the various pitfalls of the mainstream accounts of testimony in mind, Lackey lays out her own account – what she calls the “Disjunctive View of the Nature of Testimony” (DVNT) – which she defines as follows:

DVNT: *S* testifies that *p* by making an act of communication *a* if and only if (in part) in virtue of *a*'s communicable content, (1) *S* reasonably intends to convey the information that *p* or (2) *a* is reasonably taken as conveying information the *p*.⁷

One needn't get bogged down in the nuances of Lackey's definition to notice the simple point that it avoids the “statement-problems” plaguing other accounts of testimony. Now, it isn't clear to us what Lackey means by ‘reasonably’ here. That said, for our purposes, perhaps an even more general account of testimony can be given, one that captures the heart of Lackey's definition, without getting bogged down in defining what it means to be reasonable and if we can understand ‘reasonably’ in strictly externalist ways. The account of testimony we propose goes as follows:

Testimony: *S* testifies to *S** just in case *S* intentionally communicates truth to *S**

Here, a very broad (and simple) picture of testimony is painted. This is not to say that the above definition encapsulates all the necessary and sufficient conditions for an adequate account of testimony. Indeed, it almost certainly does not. However, the principle aim of this essay is to highlight a form of testimony that is often (though unintentionally) excluded by mainstream accounts. The above definition is broad enough to provide space for the form of testimony we will argue for below.

Having defined what is meant by testimony, we are in the position to see how animals can transfer knowledge. It's well-known that dogs are capable of learning labels for hundreds of different objects, and even respond to the different objects by their category. There is evidence that dogs can develop concepts in the strictest sense.⁸ If testimony requires concepts, we think dogs are eligible candidates for testimonial knowledge.

Things get more interesting when you look at how wolves communicate to one another. Of course, wolves will howl and bark to warn others not to go near. It can be said that when a wolf barks or growls, he is informing the onlooker that they will be attacked if they cross the line. Wolves will also use howling to locate each member of the pack. In a sense, each wolf testifies to the other members of their den

⁷ Lackey (2008, 35-36).

⁸ Feuerbacher and Rosales-Rules (2017).

about their whereabouts. Wolves, however, don't just testify to each other by way of verbal communication. After discussing the various ways in which wolves can communicate, Barry Lopez makes clear how wolves can create cognitive maps with their marking abilities:

The third kind of communication, about which we unfortunately know very little, is the complex of olfactory cues associated with scent marking and glandular secretions. In the wild, a traveling alpha animal either scent-marks or inspects a scent mark on average of once every two minutes, an indication of the singular importance of the activity. It is commonly believed that the primary function of scent marking is to mark out a pack's territory and so warn off intruders; but American behavioral psychologist Roger Peters, one of the first to study the phenomenon, believes that territorial marking is a secondary function. The primary one is to mark territory on a regular basis for the benefits of the resident pack. The marks are an aid in establishing cognitive maps for the younger wolves, mental pictures of the home range, so that they know where they are with respect to certain creeks or recent kills and how to get where they need to go.⁹

Let's say that you are skeptical about whether wolves (or fill in the blank with your favorite animal [hippo?]) can transfer knowledge through testimony. Maybe you think the science is just too speculative to make a judgement. No worries. Can't we concede that it is at least metaphysically possible for there to be animals that meet the account of testimony we give above, and yet, are cognitively incapable of making probability assessments from past experiences? If wolves aren't a successful counterexample to reductionism, their existence at least gives us reason to think that there are close enough creatures that could exist, who could obtain testimonial knowledge apart from the inductive process. And we think that's all we need for reductionism to be problematic.

Now, it could be argued that any good account of testimonial warrant will need to include a no-defeater condition. And, in order for a subject to meet a no-defeater condition in a non-trivial sense, the subject will need to have a grasp potential objection to the testimony being given.¹⁰ Animals lack such an ability. So, one might have to endorse a quantum epistemology where young children and animals (i.e., smaller objects) are governed by different epistemic rules and norms than mature adult persons (i.e., larger objects). This might appear, at least initially, as an unwanted consequence.

We see no reason however, why a quantum epistemology should be unwelcomed. In fact, as proper functionalists, we think that it is each individual creature's design plan that specifies her epistemic responsibilities, epistemic norms,

⁹ Lopez (1978: 48).

¹⁰ Lackey (2008, 195-219).

and doxastic function. Far from there being simply two types of design plans – one for mature cognitive agents and the other for immature cognitive agents – we think there could potentially be an infinite number of design plans, each dictating their own set of rules that govern doxastic practice. In this sense, we think proper functionalism would entail a many-worlds epistemology, an epistemology that recognizes that due to one's age and circumstances, one could be governed by a completely different set of rules and norms than any of one's counterparts. And it's far from unclear why this should be seen as problematic.

Having said all of this, let's make clear our intentions for this short paper. We have argued that there is a counterexample (or at least a possible one) to the reductionist thesis that should be given at least some attention in the relevant literature. We don't mean to suggest that the reductionist is without a response to the counterexample proposed, but we think it's about time epistemologists start focusing on how broad we should understand testimony and to what degree, animals might guide our process in developing our epistemology of testimony, especially for those like us, who are card carrying epistemic particularists. It simply seems obvious to us that animals possess testimonial knowledge, and we think reductionists will have a hard time making sense of this.

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