

The logo of Northern Illinois University, featuring a circular emblem with the letters 'N', 'I', 'U' and 'S', 'W', 'E' around a central design.

Knowing from Testimony

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Abstract

Testimony is a vital and ubiquitous source of knowledge. Were we to refrain from accepting the testimony of others, our lives would be impoverished in startling and debilitating ways. Despite the vital role that testimony occupies in our epistemic lives, traditional epistemological theories have focused primarily on other sources, such as sense perception, memory, and reason, with relatively little attention devoted specifically to testimony. In recent years, however, the epistemic significance of testimony has been more fully appreciated. I shall here focus on two questions that have received the most attention in recent work in the epistemology of testimony. First, is testimonial knowledge acquired only by being *transmitted* from speaker to hearer? Second, must a hearer have *positive reasons* to justifiably accept a speaker's testimony?

Testimony is a vital and ubiquitous source of knowledge. We rely on the reports of others for our beliefs about the food we eat, the medicine we ingest, the products we buy, the geography of the world, discoveries in science, historical information, and many other areas that play crucial roles in both our practical and our intellectual lives. Even many of our most important beliefs about ourselves were learned at an earlier time from our parents and caretakers, such as the date of our birth, the identity of our parents, our ethnic backgrounds, and so on. Were we to refrain from accepting the testimony of others, our lives would be impoverished in startling and debilitating ways.

Despite the vital role that testimony occupies in our epistemic lives, traditional epistemological theories have focused primarily on other sources, such as sense perception, memory, and reason, with relatively little attention devoted specifically to testimony. In recent years, however, the epistemic significance of testimony has been more fully appreciated, and the current literature has benefited from the publication of a considerable amount of interesting and innovative work in this area.¹ I shall here focus on two questions that have received the most attention in recent work in the epistemology of testimony. First, is testimonial knowledge acquired only by being *transmitted* from speaker to hearer? Second, must a hearer have *positive reasons* to justifiably accept a speaker's testimony?²

1. *Testimony and Testimony-Based Belief*

The central concern in contemporary discussions of the epistemology of testimony has not been what testimony is, but, rather, how we successfully acquire justified belief or knowledge on the basis of what other people tell us. As a result, it is typical for those who are interested in the epistemic status of testimonial beliefs to embrace a very broad notion of what it is to testify. So, for instance, Elizabeth Fricker holds that the domain of testimony that is of epistemological interest is that of “tellings generally” with “no restrictions either on subject matter, or on the speaker’s epistemic relation to it.”³ Similarly, Robert Audi claims that in accounting for testimonial knowledge and justification, we must understand testimony as “. . . people’s telling us things.”⁴ And Ernest Sosa embraces “. . . a broad sense of testimony that counts posthumous publications as examples . . . [it] requires only that it be a statement of someone’s thoughts or beliefs, which they might direct to the world at large and to no one in particular.”⁵

But clearly not everything we learn through the testimony of others qualifies as *testimonially based* knowledge. For instance, suppose you hear me say: “ten people have spoken in this room today” and, having counted the previous nine, come to know that ten people have spoken in this room today.⁶ Here, although my statement is causally relevant to your forming this belief, the basis of your knowledge is perceptual, not testimonial; it results from your having heard and counted the speakers. Or suppose that I sing “I have a soprano voice” in a soprano voice and you come to know this entirely on the basis of hearing my soprano voice.⁷ Again, the resulting knowledge is perceptual in nature since it is based on your hearing my soprano voice rather than on what I testified to. What is important for distinctively testimonial justification or knowledge is that a hearer form a given belief *on the basis of the content of a speaker’s testimony*. So cases such as those above – where a belief is formed entirely on the basis of features *about* the speaker’s testimony – are precluded from qualifying as instances of *testimonial* justification or knowledge.⁸

There are also intermediate cases in which a hearer has relevant background information and uses it to derive knowledge from the statement of a speaker. Suppose, for example, that you know from past experience that I report that there is no milk in the refrigerator only when there is some. Now when I report to you that there is no milk in the refrigerator, you may supplement my testimony with your background information and thereby derive knowledge that there is milk in the refrigerator. Because the epistemic status of beliefs formed in these types of cases relies so heavily on memory and inference, the resulting justification and knowledge are only partially testimonially based. Hence, such beliefs may fall outside the scope of theories purporting to capture only those beliefs that are entirely based on testimony.

2. *Transmission of Epistemic Properties*

Most current views in the epistemology of testimony are built around a central thesis, which we may call the *Transmission of Epistemic Properties* (hereafter, TEP). According to TEP, a testimonial exchange involves a speaker's belief, along with the epistemic properties it possesses, being *transmitted* to a hearer. TEP has two dimensions – a necessity thesis and a sufficiency thesis:

TEP-N: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted) on the basis of A's testimony that *p* only if A's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted).⁹

TEP-S: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, if (1) A's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted), (2) B comes to believe that *p* on the basis of the content of A's testimony that *p*, and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that *p*,¹⁰ then B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted).¹¹

Support for this view, particularly for TEP-N, derives from a purported analogy between testimony and memory. Just as memory is thought to be capable of only *preserving* epistemic properties from one time to another – and cannot therefore *generate* new epistemic properties – testimony is said to be capable of only *transmitting* epistemic properties from one person to another. So, on this view, just as I cannot know that *p* on the basis of memory unless I non-memorially knew that *p* at an earlier time, a hearer cannot know that *p* on the basis of testimony unless the speaker from whom it was acquired herself knows that *p*. Likewise, on this view, just as my knowing that *p* at an earlier time may be sufficient, in the absence of undefeated defeaters, for me to memorially know that *p* now, a speaker's knowing that *p* may be sufficient, in the absence of undefeated defeaters, for a hearer to know that *p* on the basis of her testimony.

Recently, however, objections have been raised to both dimensions of TEP, thereby calling into question the widely accepted view that transmission lies at the heart of the epistemology of testimony.¹² Let us begin with those against TEP-N. Two general types of counterexamples have been raised to the thesis that speaker knowledge (justification, warrant) is a necessary condition for testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant). The first type involves speakers who fail to believe, and hence know, a proposition to which they are testifying, but nevertheless reliably convey the information in question through their testimony. So, for instance, consider the following:

Case 1: Clarissa is a devoutly Christian fourth-grade teacher whose faith includes a firm belief in the truth of creationism and an equally firm belief in the falsity of evolutionary theory. Nevertheless, Clarissa recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not basing her own commitment to creationism on evidence at all but, rather, on the personal faith that she has in an all-powerful Creator. Because of this, Clarissa does not think that she should impose her

religious convictions on her fourth-grade students. Instead, she regards her duty as a teacher to include presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, while presenting her biology lesson today, she asserts to her students “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*.” Although Clarissa neither believes nor knows this proposition, her students form the corresponding true belief on the basis of her reliable testimony.

What Case 1 reveals is that an *unreliable believer* may nonetheless be a *reliable testifier*, and so may reliably convey knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) to a hearer despite the fact that she fails to possess it herself. For although Clarissa herself ignores the relevant scientific evidence concerning evolutionary theory and thus lacks the belief that modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*, she bases her testimony regarding this topic firmly on such evidence. This enables Clarissa to impart knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) to her students that she fails to possess herself, thereby showing that TEP-N is false.¹³

The second type of counterexample that has been raised to TEP-N involves speakers who have an undefeated defeater for believing a proposition to which they are testifying, but manage reliably to convey the proposition through their testimony without transmitting the defeater in question to their hearers. For instance, consider the following:

Case 2: Bartholomew is incorrectly told by an otherwise reliable optometrist that his vision is nearly completely unreliable, yet for no rational reason refuses to accept this diagnosis. So, even though the optometrist’s report is false, Bartholomew should accept the diagnosis in question given all of the evidence that he has available to him. Otherwise put, the optometrist’s diagnosis provides Bartholomew with an *undefeated defeater* for most of his visual beliefs. Nevertheless, as he is walking out of the doctor’s office, Bartholomew sees a car accident down the block, forms the corresponding true belief that there was such an accident, and later reports this fact to Iris but does not report the optometrist’s diagnosis to her. Iris forms the corresponding true belief.

What Case 2 reveals is that defeaters do not automatically “come along for the ride” when a speaker offers testimony to a hearer. For though the optometrist’s diagnosis defeats the epistemic status of Bartholomew’s perceptual belief about the car accident, Iris has no reason for doubting either Bartholomew’s perceptual or testimonial practices. Because of this, even though it is irrational for Bartholomew to trust his visual experiences in the face of the optometrist’s testimony, such irrationality is not transferred to Iris via his testimony. This enables Bartholomew to impart knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) to her that he fails to possess himself, once again showing that TEP-N is false.¹⁴

Let us now turn to counterexamples to TEP-S. Here, again, there are two general types of counterexamples that have been raised to the thesis that, in the absence of undefeated defeaters, speaker knowledge (justification, warrant) is sufficient for testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant). The

first type of case shows that, for reasons having to do specifically with the *hearer*, a hearer's belief may fail to be known (justified, warranted) even though there are no relevant undefeated defeaters and the speaker from whom it was acquired has the knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) in question. Consider the following:

Case 3: Sam is a compulsively trusting person with respect to the testimony of his neighbor, Pam, for whom he has obsessive romantic feelings. Not only does he always trust Pam when he has very good reason to believe her, he also trusts her when he has very good reason to not believe her. While on his way to the grocery store yesterday, Sam ran into Pam and she told him that she had seen a great blue heron while jogging on a trail earlier that day. Sam, of course, readily accepted Pam's testimony. It turns out that Pam did in fact see a great blue heron while jogging that day, that she is very reliable with respect to her epistemic practices, both in general and in this particular instance, and that Sam has no reason to doubt the proffered testimony. Given his compulsively trusting nature with respect to Pam, however, even if he had had massive amounts of evidence available to him indicating, for instance, that Pam did not see a great blue heron, that she is an unreliable epistemic agent, that she is an unreliable testifier, that great blue herons do not live in this part of the country, and so on, Sam would have just as readily accepted Pam's testimony.

What Case 3 shows is that while a speaker may be both a perfectly reliable believer and testifier, *a hearer may be so constituted as to prevent the epistemic properties of a speaker's belief from being transmitted to her*. For despite the fact that Pam's belief about the great blue heron possesses all of the epistemic properties in question – she is a reliable epistemic agent, both in general and in the particular case at issue, and she did, in fact, see a great blue heron while jogging yesterday – Sam's compulsively trusting nature with respect to Pam's testimony renders him *incapable* of being sensitive to the presence of defeaters regarding her reports. In particular, were Sam to be inundated with massive amounts of counterevidence, he would have accepted Pam's testimony just as readily as he did in the complete absence of such counterevidence. Because of this, Sam's belief that there was a great blue heron near the relevant jogging trail is *evidentially insensitive* in a way that is clearly incompatible with justification, warrant, and knowledge. Therefore, while Pam's belief possesses all of the epistemic properties in question, the belief that Sam forms on the basis of her testimony possesses none of them, thereby showing that TEP-S is false.¹⁵

The second type of counterexample to TEP-S shows that, for reasons having to do specifically with the *speaker*, a hearer's belief may fail to be known (justified, warranted) even though there are no relevant undefeated defeaters and the speaker from whom it was acquired has the knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) in question. Consider the following:

Case 4: While drinking a latte at Starbucks yesterday, Larry ran into his childhood friend, Mary, and she told him that she had seen an orca whale while boating earlier that day. Having acquired very good reasons for trusting Mary over the

fifteen years he has known her, Larry readily accepted her testimony. It turns out that Mary did in fact see an orca whale on the boat trip in question, that she is very reliable with respect to her epistemic practices, both in general and in this particular instance, that she is generally a very reliable testifier, and that Larry has no reason to doubt the proffered testimony. However, in order to promote a whale watching business she is in the process of starting, she would have reported to Larry – in precisely the same manner – that she had seen an orca whale even if she hadn't. (Of course, she wouldn't have believed that she had seen an orca whale if she hadn't.) Moreover, given the pattern of the whales' travel combined with the particular time of year it is, it is in fact quite surprising that Mary saw an orca whale when and where she did.

While Case 1 shows that an unreliable believer may nonetheless be a reliable testifier, Case 4 shows that a *reliable believer* may nonetheless be an *unreliable testifier*. For notice, first, that Mary *would have* reported to Larry that there was an orca whale in the relevant body of water even if there hadn't been one and, second, that it was in fact much more likely for Mary *not* to have seen an orca whale when she did than for her to have seen one. The combination of these two features has the following result: there are nearby possible worlds in which an orca whale was not in the relevant body of water, Mary nonetheless reports that there was one, and Larry, being in the same evidential situation as he is in the actual world, readily forms the corresponding belief on the basis of Mary's testimony. More generally, Larry's belief about there having been an orca whale in the relevant body of water is *counterfactually insensitive to the truth*. For instance, his belief is neither sensitive (à la Nozick) nor safe (à la Sosa)¹⁶: if *p* were false, Larry would still believe that *p*, and Larry would believe that *p* without it being so that *p*. Otherwise put, in nearby worlds where it is false that an orca whale was in the relevant body of water, Larry believes that there was one, and there are nearby worlds where Larry believes that an orca whale was in the relevant body of water without this being so. Given this, the true belief that Larry forms on the basis of Mary's testimony not only fails to qualify as knowledge, it also fails to be justified or warranted. Thus, while Mary's belief possesses all of the epistemic properties in question, the belief that Larry forms on the basis of her testimony possesses none of them, thereby showing once again that TEP-S is false.¹⁷

One of the central conclusions that the above considerations motivate is the replacement of TEP-N and TEP-S with conditions focusing on the *statements* of speakers rather than on their states of believing or knowing. For instance, Cases 1 and 2 reveal that when unreliable believers are nonetheless reliable testifiers, speakers can impart knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) to hearers that they fail to possess themselves. This motivates replacing TEP-N with the following *Reliability of the Statement-Necessity* thesis (RS-N):

RS-N: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted) on the basis of A's testimony that *p* only if A's statement that *p* is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive.

The requisite reliability of the statement in question can, in turn, be fleshed out in any number of ways. For instance, it may be necessary that the speaker's statement be sensitive, safe, properly or virtuously formed, and so on.¹⁸ The central point of RS-N, in contrast to TEP-N, is that the speaker's states of believing and knowing are epistemically relevant only insofar as they bear on her capacity to be a competent testifier.¹⁹

Like TEP-N, RS-N expresses only a necessary condition for testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant). A complete epistemology of testimony will, then, require further conditions, such as (2) and (3) from TEP-S. Thus, at a minimum, the above considerations motivate endorsing the following *Statement View of Testimony* (SVT):

SVT: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted) on the basis of A's testimony that *p* only if (1) A's statement that *p* is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, (2) B comes to believe that *p* on the basis of the content of A's statement that *p*, and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that *p*.²⁰

Besides adding a condition requiring the truth of the belief in question when knowledge is at issue, are any further conditions needed for a complete view of testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant)? Answering this question depends on how the debate between non-reductionists and reductionists is settled, a topic to which we now turn.

3. Non-Reductionism and Reductionism

What precisely is needed in order for a hearer to be justified in accepting the testimony of a speaker? This question lies at the center of the epistemology of testimony and the current philosophical literature contains two main options for answering it: *non-reductionism* and *reductionism*.

According to non-reductionists – whose historical roots are standardly traced back to the work of Thomas Reid – testimony is *just as basic* a source of justification (warrant, knowledge) as sense perception, memory, inference, and the like. Accordingly, so as long as there are no relevant undefeated defeaters, hearers can justifiably accept the assertions of speakers *merely* on the basis of a speaker's testimony.²¹ Otherwise put, so long as there is no available evidence *against* accepting a speaker's report, the hearer has no positive epistemic work to do in order to justifiably accept the testimony in question.²²

There are two different kinds of defeaters that are typically taken to be relevant. First, there are what we might call *psychological defeaters*. A psychological defeater is a doubt or belief that is had by S that indicates that S's belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained.²³ Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being *had* by S, regardless of their truth value or justificatory status.²⁴ Second, there are what we might call *normative defeaters*. A normative defeater is a doubt or belief that S *ought to have* that indicates that S's belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained.²⁵

Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being doubts or beliefs that that *S should have* (whether or not *S* does have them) given the presence of certain available evidence.²⁶ The underlying thought here is that certain kinds of doubts and beliefs contribute epistemically unacceptable *irrationality* to doxastic systems and, accordingly, justification and knowledge can be defeated or undermined by their presence.

Moreover, a defeater may itself be either defeated or undefeated. Suppose, for instance, that Holly believes that there is a hawk nesting in her backyard because she saw it there this afternoon, but Dominick tells her, and she thereby comes to believe, that the bird is instead a falcon. Now, the justification Holly had for believing that there is a hawk in her backyard has been defeated by her belief that the bird is a falcon. But since psychological defeaters can themselves be beliefs, they, too, are candidates for defeat. For instance, suppose that Holly consults a bird guidebook to check whether the bird in her backyard is a falcon and she discovers that it is in fact a Cooper's hawk. In this case, the belief that she acquires from the bird book provides her with a psychological defeater for the belief that she acquired via Dominick's testimony, and hence it provides her with a *defeater-defeater* for her original belief that there is a hawk nesting in her backyard. And, as should be suspected, defeater-defeaters can also be defeated by further doubts and beliefs, which, in turn, can be defeated by further doubts and beliefs, and so on. Similar considerations involving reasons, rather than doubts and beliefs, apply in the case of normative defeaters. Now, when one has a defeater *d* for one's belief that *p* that is not itself defeated, one has what is called an *undefeated defeater* for one's belief that *p*. It is the presence of undefeated defeaters, not merely defeaters, that is incompatible with testimonial justification (warrant, knowledge).

In contrast to non-reductionism, reductionists – whose historical roots are typically traced back to the work of David Hume – maintain that in order to justifiably accept the testimony of speakers, more is needed than the mere absence of undefeated defeaters. In particular, proponents of reductionism argue that hearers must have sufficiently good *positive reasons* for accepting a given report, reasons that are not themselves ineliminably based on the testimony of others. Typically, these reasons are the result of induction: for instance, we observe a general conformity between facts and reports and, with the aid of memory and reason, we inductively infer that certain speakers, contexts, or types of reports are reliable sources of information. In this way, the justification of testimony is *reduced* to the justification we have for sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.²⁷

There are, however, at least two different answers given to what *relata* are involved in the relevant testimonial reductions. The first answer – a view often called *global reductionism* – is that the justification of *testimony as a source of belief* reduces to the justification of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. In particular, global reductionists maintain that in order to justifiably accept a speaker's report, a hearer must have non-testimonially

based positive reasons for believing that *testimony is generally reliable*. The second version of reductionism – often called *local reductionism* – is that the justification of *each particular report or instance of testimony* reduces to the justification of instances of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. Specifically, local reductionists claim that in order to justifiably accept a speaker's testimony, a hearer must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting *the particular report in question*.²⁸

Motivation for preferring non-reductionism over reductionism derives in large part from considering problems that are said to face the latter but not the former. Let us begin with two objections targeting the global version of reductionism. The first is that in order to have non-testimonially based positive reasons that testimony is generally reliable, one would have to be exposed not only to a non-random, wide-ranging sample of reports, but also to a non-random, wide-ranging sample of the corresponding facts. But both are said to be problematic. With respect to the reports, most of us have been exposed only to a very limited range of reports from speakers in our native language in a handful of communities in our native country. This limited sample of reports provides only a fraction of what would be required to legitimately conclude that testimony is *generally* reliable. With respect to the corresponding facts, a similar problem arises: the observational base of ordinary epistemic agents is simply far too small to allow the requisite induction about the reliability of testimony. As C.A.J. Coody says:

... it seems absurd to suggest that, individually, we have done anything like the amount of field-work that [reductionism] requires ... many of us have never seen a baby born, nor have most of us examined the circulation of the blood nor the actual geography of the world nor any fair sample of the laws of the land, nor have we made the observations that lie behind our knowledge that the lights in the sky are heavenly bodies immensely distant nor a vast number of other observations that [reductionism] would seem to require.²⁹

Moreover, with many reports, such as those involving complex scientific, economic, or mathematical theories, most of us simply lack the conceptual machinery needed to properly check the reports against the facts. Global reductionism, then, is said to ultimately lead to skepticism about testimonial knowledge, at least for most epistemic agents. Obviously, since non-reductionism does not require that a hearer have any positive beliefs about the general reliability of testimony, such a view does not face any problem of this sort.

A second objection raised against global reductionism is that it is questionable whether there even is an epistemically significant *fact of the matter* regarding the general reliability of testimony. To see this, consider, for instance, the following epistemically heterogeneous list of types of reports, all of which are subsumed under “testimony in general”: reports about the time of day, what one had for breakfast, the achievements of one's children, whether one's loved one looks attractive in a certain outfit, the character of one's political opponents, one's age and weight, one's criminal record, and

so on. Some of these types of reports may be generally highly reliable (e.g. about the time of day and what one had for breakfast), others generally highly unreliable (e.g. about the achievements of one's children, the looks of one's loved ones, and the character of one's political opponents), yet others generally very epistemically mixed, depending on the speaker (e.g. about one's age, weight, and criminal record). Because of this epistemic heterogeneity, it is doubtful, not only whether "testimony" picks out an epistemically interesting or unified *kind*, but also whether it even makes sense to talk about testimony being a *generally reliable source*. As Elizabeth Fricker says, "... looking for generalisations about the reliability or otherwise of testimony ... as a homogenous whole, will not be an enlightening project. Illuminating generalisations, if there are any, will be about particular types of testimony, differentiated according to subject matter, or type of speaker, or both. ... [W]hen it comes to the probability of accuracy of speakers' assertions, and what sorts of factors warrant a hearer in trusting a speaker, *testimony is not a unitary category*. ..."³⁰ Once again, non-reductionism is said to avoid this type of problem since such a view does not require any positive beliefs about the general reliability of testimony.

Let us now turn to two central problems that are said to face the local version of reductionism. The first is that young children clearly acquire a great deal of knowledge from their parents and teachers, and it is doubtful that they possess – or even could possess – positive reasons for accepting much of what they are told.³¹ For instance, an 18-month-old baby may come to know that the stove is hot from the testimony of her mother, but it is unclear whether she has the cognitive sophistication to have reasons for believing her mother to be a reliable source of information. Given this, reductionists may be hard-pressed to explain how such young subjects could possess all of the knowledge they appear to have. In contrast, since the only evidential condition non-reductionists require is the absence of undefeated defeaters – a condition that can clearly be satisfied by even the most cognitively immature subjects – such a view can easily account for the testimonial knowledge possessed by young children.

The second problem that is said to face local reductionism is that most of us frequently acquire testimonial knowledge from speakers about whom we know very little.³² For instance, upon arriving in Chicago for the first time, I may receive accurate directions to Navy Pier from the first passerby I see. Most agree that such a transaction can result in my acquiring testimonial knowledge of Navy Pier's whereabouts, despite the fact that my positive reasons for accepting the directions in question – if indeed I possess any – are scanty at best. Once again, since the only condition required of hearers by non-reductionism is the absence of undefeated defeaters, such a view of testimony is able to accommodate this kind of knowledge with no difficulty.

Support for preferring reductionism over non-reductionism derives primarily from considering the consequences of not requiring any positive epistemic work from recipients of testimony. For notice that non-

reductionists commit themselves to saying that testimonial justification (warrant, knowledge) can be acquired in the complete absence of *any* positive reasons on the part of the hearer. So, for instance, consider the following:

Case 5: George, an average human being, is taking a walk through the forest one sunny morning and he sees someone in the distance. Although the individual's physical appearance enables George to identify her as an alien from another planet, he does not know anything about either this kind of alien or the planet from which she comes. When George catches up to the alien, she turns to him and immediately says in what sounds like English that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of her planet. Without hesitation, George forms the corresponding belief that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the alien's planet. It turns out that the alien does, in fact, communicate in English, tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of her planet, and she is a reliable testifier, both in general and in this particular instance.

Now, since the testifier in question is an alien about whom George knows nothing, he truly has no epistemically relevant positive reasons: he has no commonsense psychological alien theory, he has no beliefs about the general reliability of aliens as testifiers, he has no beliefs about the reliability of this particular alien, and so on. We can also suppose that there is nothing about the alien that provides George with relevant undefeated defeaters. Now, is George justified in believing that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the planet in question on the basis of the alien's testimony?

Here reductionists argue that the answer should clearly be no. For despite the fact that the alien's report is both true and reliable, it is argued that it is plainly irrational epistemically for George to form the belief in question on the basis of the alien's testimony. For instance, it may very well be accepted practice in alien society to be insincere and deceptive when testifying to others. Or normal alien psychology may be what we Earthlings would consider psychosis. Or the language that the aliens use, although superficially indistinguishable from English, may really be Twenglish, where Twenglish uses the "negation" sign for affirming a proposition. For all George knows when he accepts the alien's testimony, each of these scenarios is just as likely as the possibility that these aliens are reliable testifiers who speak English. But, in the absence of any way to discriminate among these possibilities, reductionists argue that the appropriate epistemic response is to withhold belief.³³ Because non-reductionists do not require any positive epistemic work from recipients of testimony in order to acquire justified belief or knowledge, they are committed to granting George justified belief and ultimately knowledge of the alien's testimony, thereby sanctioning what reductionists regard as gullibility, epistemic irrationality, and intellectual irresponsibility.³⁴

Thus, both non-reductionism and reductionism have been subject to various objections, objections that opponents use to motivate their own views. The direction that most recent work in the epistemology of testimony is taking is to avoid these problems by developing qualified or hybrid views

of either non-reductionism or reductionism.³⁵ Whether such views inherit versions of their ancestors' problems has, however, yet to be seen.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to Tamar Szabo Gendler, an anonymous referee, and, especially, Baron Reed for helpful comments on an earlier version of this piece.

Notes

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¹ A collection of recent papers on the topic can be found in Lackey and Sosa (2006).

² When I speak of *justification* and *warrant*, I am concerned with these concepts only insofar as they have some close connection with knowledge. Thus, there may be some subjective notions of these concepts that escape some of the material in this paper. My interest here, however, is in the *epistemology* of testimony.

³ Fricker (1995, 396–7).

⁴ Audi (1997, 406).

⁵ Sosa (1991, 219). For views of the nature of testimony with various additional restrictions, see Ross (1975), Coady (1992), Graham (1997), and Lackey (2006b).

⁶ This type of example can be found in Sosa (1991).

⁷ This is a variation of an example found in Audi (1997).

⁸ One way to see this it to notice that in both of the examples, you would have come to the same belief even if I had made my utterance in a language that you do not understand.

⁹ Proponents of the necessity thesis (TEP-N) include Welbourne (1979, 1981, 1986, 1994), Hardwig (1985, 1991), Ross (1986), Burge (1993, 1997), Plantinga (1993), McDowell (1994), Williamson (1996, 2000), Audi (1997, 1998, 2006), Owens (2000), Reynolds (2002), and Schmitt (2006). For slightly weaker versions of this thesis, see Dummett (1994) and Fricker (2006, forthcoming).

¹⁰ For discussion of what forms “undefeated defeaters” might take, see Section 3.

¹¹ Proponents of different versions of the sufficiency thesis (TEP-S) include Austin (1979), Evans (1982), Fricker (1987), Coady (1992), and Owens (2000). Burge (1993), Williamson (1996), and Audi (1997) endorse qualified versions of this thesis. For instance, Burge claims that “[i]f one has acquired one’s belief from others in a *normal way*, and if the others know the proposition, one acquires knowledge” (1992, 477, fn. 16; emphasis added). Timothy Williamson writes that “[i]n *normal circumstances*, a speaker who asserts that *P* thereby puts a hearer in a position to know that *P* if (and only if) the speaker knows that *P*” (1996, 520; emphasis added). Similarly, Audi writes, “Concerning knowledge, we might say that at least *normally*, a belief that *p* based on testimony thereby constitutes knowledge . . . provided that the attester knows that *p* and the believer has no reason to doubt either *p* or the attester’s credibility concerning it” (1997, 412; emphasis added).

¹² See, for instance, Lackey (1999, forthcoming), Graham (2000), and Goldberg (2001, 2005).

¹³ This type of argument can be found in Lackey (1999, forthcoming).

¹⁴ This sort of argument can be found in Lackey (1999).

¹⁵ This sort of objection can be found in Lackey (forthcoming).

¹⁶ See Nozick (1981) and Sosa (1996, 1999, 2000, 2002). S’s true belief that *p* is *sensitive* if S would not have held *p* had *p* been false (in nearby possible worlds); S’s true belief that *p* is *safe* if it could not easily have happened that S holds *p* where *p* is false.

¹⁷ This type of objection can be found in Lackey (forthcoming). Moreover, the following represents a third kind of counterexample to TEP-S:

Upon arriving in Chicago for the first time, Alvin asks the first passerby that he sees, Zoe, for directions to the Sears Tower and she reports that it is six blocks east. While Zoe knows that this is the case, and Alvin has no reason to doubt either her credibility as a speaker or the truth of the proposition to which she is testifying, she is the only reliable speaker in this part of

Chicago, completely surrounded by incompetents and liars. Because of this, that Alvin chooses a reliable testifier who correctly points him in the direction of the Sears Tower is entirely a matter of good luck.

Now, even though Zoe knows that the Sears Tower is six blocks east, and Alvin does not possess any relevant undefeated defeaters for the report in question, this case represents a testimonial Gettier-type case for the recipient of testimony. In particular, Alvin's luckily choosing the only reliable testifier who is completely surrounded by incompetents and liars is analogous to a perceiver luckily seeing the only real barn that is completely surrounded by barn facades. Hence, Alvin does not come to know that the Sears Tower is six blocks east on the basis of Zoe's testimony, despite the fact that conditions (1)–(3) are satisfied. Once again, TEP-S is shown to be false.

¹⁸ See Nozick (1981), Sosa (1996, 1999, 2000, 2002), Williamson (2000), and Pritchard (2004), Plantinga (1993), and Sosa (1991), respectively.

¹⁹ Of course, often times, it is precisely *because* a speaker is insincere or an incompetent believer that she is an incompetent or unreliable testifier. For instance, if I frequently lie or form inaccurate beliefs, more often than not this will prevent you from acquiring knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) on the basis of my testimony. But the reason why you are so prevented is that my insincerity or incompetence has made my testimony unreliable. Moreover, a *hearer's beliefs* about a speaker's sincerity and competence can have epistemic significance. For instance, if I believe that you are a compulsive liar or an unreliable epistemic source, then even if you are neither of these, the mere fact that I believe that you are can provide me with a defeater for accepting your testimony. Hence, my beliefs about your sincerity and competence can prevent me from acquiring knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) on the basis of your testimony.

²⁰ For a defense of the SVT, see Lackey (forthcoming).

²¹ Proponents of various versions of non-reductionism include Austin (1979), Welbourne (1979, 1981, 1986, 1994), Evans (1982), Ross (1986), Hardwig (1985, 1991), Coady (1992, 1994), Reid (1993), Burge (1993, 1997), Plantinga (1993), Webb (1993), Dummert (1994), Foley (1994), McDowell (1994), Strawson (1994), Williamson (1996, 2000), Goldman (1999), Schmitt (1999), Insole (2000), Owens (2000), Rysiew (2002), Weiner (2003), Goldberg (2006), and Sosa (2006). Some phrase their view in terms of knowledge, others in terms of justification or entitlement, still others in terms of warrant. Audi (1997, 1998, 2004, 2006) embraces a non-reductionist view of testimonial knowledge, but not of testimonial justification. Stevenson (1993), Millgram (1997), and Graham (2006) defend restricted versions of non-reductionism.

²² This is a broad characterization, with subtler versions of non-reductionism not always clearly subsumed by it (see, for instance, Goldberg (2006) and Graham (2006)).

²³ To be even more precise, there are two different kinds of psychological defeaters: *rebutting defeaters* are those that indicate the target belief is *false* while *undercutting defeaters* are those that indicate the target belief is *unreliably formed or sustained*. See Pollock (1986) for further development of the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters.

²⁴ For various discussions of what I call psychological defeaters see, for example, Bonjour (1980, 1985), Nozick (1981), Pollock (1986), Goldman (1986), Plantinga (1993), Lackey (1999, 2003, 2005, 2006a), Bergmann (1997, 2004), and Reed (forthcoming).

²⁵ Following the distinction in note 23, there are rebutting and undercutting normative defeaters. The central difference is that while psychological defeaters are doubts or beliefs had by the subject, their normative counterparts are doubts or beliefs that the subject *should* have. For more on this, see Lackey (1999, 2003, 2005, 2006a) and Reed (forthcoming).

²⁶ For discussions involving what I call normative defeaters, approached in a number of different ways, see Bonjour (1980, 1985), Goldman (1986), Fricker (1987, 1994), Chisholm (1989), Burge (1993, 1997), McDowell (1994), Audi (1997, 1998), Lackey (1999, 2003, 2005, forthcoming), Williams (1999), Bonjour and Sosa (2003), Hawthorne (2004), and Reed (forthcoming). What all of these discussions have in common is simply the idea that evidence can defeat knowledge (justification, warrant) even when the subject does not form any corresponding beliefs from the evidence in question.

In addition to psychological and normative defeaters, there are what we might call *factual defeaters*. A factual defeater is a true proposition, *d*, such that if *d* were added to S's belief system, then S would no longer be justified in believing that *p*. Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being *true*. For instance, you may correctly believe that you saw a coyote in Joshua Tree National

Park and yet the fact that there are dogs that you would not be able to distinguish from coyotes that frequently visit this park may nonetheless prevent such a belief from being an instance of knowledge. In particular, *that there are dogs indistinguishable to you from coyotes that frequent the park in which you saw the real coyote* is a true proposition which, if added to your belief system, would result in your belief being unjustified (see, for instance, Lehrer (1965, 1974), Lehrer and Paxson (1969), Klein (1971, 1976, 1979, 1980), Sosa (1974, 1980), and Swain (1981)). In what follows, however, I shall focus only on psychological and normative defeaters since these are the kinds of defeaters generally taken by both non-reductionists and reductionists to be incompatible with testimonial justification (warrant, knowledge). In contrast, the attempt to rule out Gettier-type cases via this third class of defeaters is not endorsed by all such proponents.

²⁷ Proponents of different versions of reductionism include Hume (1975), Fricker (1987, 1994, 1995, 2002, 2006, forthcoming), Adler (1994, 2002), Lyons (1997), Lipton (1998), and Van Cleve (2006). For a nice discussion of Hume's version of reductionism, see Root (2001). Faulkner (2000), Lackey (2006a), and Lehrer (2006) develop hybrid or qualified reductionist/non-reductionist views of testimonial justification (warrant, knowledge).

²⁸ "My reliance on a particular piece of testimony *reduces locally* just if I have adequate grounds to take my informant to be trustworthy on this occasion independently of accepting as true her very utterance" (Fricker, 1995, 404).

²⁹ Coady (1992, 82).

³⁰ Fricker (1994, 139; emphasis added).

³¹ See, for instance, Audi (1997). For a response to this objection, see Lackey (2005).

³² See, for instance, Webb (1993), Foley (1994), Strawson (1994), and Schmitt (1999). For a response to this objection, see Faulkner (2000), Fricker (1994, 1995), and Lackey (2006a).

³³ It was suggested to me by Lizzie Fricker that another type of example that may make the same general point would be a person receiving testimony over the Internet, with absolutely no epistemically relevant information about the source of the testimony. (Fricker also mentions this sort of case in her (2002) paper.)

³⁴ This type of argument can be found in Lackey (2006a). See also Fricker (1987, 1994, 1995), Faulkner (2000, 2002), and Lackey (2003, 2005).

³⁵ See, for instance, Faulkner (2000), Goldberg (2006), Lackey (2006a), Lehrer (2006), and Fricker (forthcoming).

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