

# 1: Knowing from Testimony

## 1. What is Testimony?

Central Ideas:

Testimony = people telling us things. Fricker: 'tellings generally, with no restrictions either on subject matter or on the speaker's epistemic relation to it'.

Testimonial Exchange – A speaker S utters 'p' and thereby asserts that p, and a hearer H forms a testimonially based belief that p.

Testimonially Based Belief – a belief formed *on the basis of testimony* (not merely caused by/dependent on testimony)

Central Questions:

- When *should* we believe what people tell us? i.e., when are our testimonially based beliefs justified?
- When – if ever – do we end up with *knowledge* by believing what people tell us? i.e. when do our testimonially based beliefs count as knowledge?

## 2. Justification & Defeaters

Not always. Not when we have *undefeated defeaters*.

- A defeater undermines your justification for believing that p.
- There are different types:
  - o Psychological Defeaters are doubts/beliefs you have that undermine your justification for p;
  - o Normative Defeaters are doubts/beliefs you should have that undermine your justification for p.
  - o Both PDs and NDs can undermine your justification for p in two ways: by indicating that p is false, or by indicating that the belief that p is unreliably formed.
- Defeaters can themselves be defeated.

*Examples*

DINOSAURS – You read Dinosaurs of Eden and come to believe humans existed peacefully with dinosaurs in the garden of Eden 6000 years ago. I take you to the NHM and show you some evidence to the contrary. You come to believe humans & dinosaurs never coexisted. Your new belief indicates your old belief was false.

NEMESIS – Tom tells you my lecture's been moved to 3pm on the Downing site and you believe him. I arrive and tell you Tom is my nemesis and a compulsive liar, and you believe me. Your new belief indicates your old belief was unreliably formed.

ALIENS – Bill tells Ben he had an alien encounter, and Ben believes him. Bill's doctor tells Ben that Bill had a bump on the head and some strong drugs. Ben refuses to believe the doctor – but he should! There's something Ben should believe that indicates his old belief was unreliably formed.

Defeaters defeat justification – and justification is required for both justified belief & knowledge. So:

**H can't come to know or justifiedly believe that p on the basis of S's testimony that p if she has undefeated defeaters for p.**

What else? Is it enough to have no undefeated defeaters?

LOVESICK – Raamy is in love with Craig – so much so that he compulsively trusts Craig's testimony. Raamy would believe what Craig said, even if he had reason not to. Craig tells Raamy truthfully that he saw a honey badger yesterday and Raamy believes him. Craig is a reliable testifier, both generally and in this instance. Raamy has no reason not to believe him. But Raamy would have believed Craig *even if* he'd had reason for thinking Craig was lying or unreliable, or that there are no honey badgers in the UK.

*Does Raamy know that Craig saw a honey badger?*

This kind of case suggests:

**H must be a *properly functioning recipient of testimony* – i.e. H must be appropriately sensitive to defeaters.**

What else?! Is it enough to (a) have no defeaters and (b) be sensitive to defeaters?

Some people have suggested this further condition:

**H must have some *positive reasons* for thinking the testimony is true or reliable.**

But this condition is controversial! It's at the heart of an important debate between *reductionists* and *non-reductionists*, which we'll come to next week. So for now, let's put that aside...

Suppose H is justified. Under what conditions does she know?

### 3. The Speaker

GOLDBACH – I tell you that every even integer greater than 2 can be expressed as the sum of two primes, and you believe me. (For the sake of argument, assume that this is true.)

*Is your belief justified? Is it knowledge?*

This kind of case suggests that perhaps testimony can only transmit knowledge – it can't create it. i.e.

**H can come to know that p on the basis of S's testimony that p only if S knows that p.**

Problem cases for this view:

SPECSAVERS – Toby is told by a normally reliable optician that his vision is almost completely unreliable. The optician happens to be wrong. But Toby has no reason to think he's wrong – and every reason to accept the diagnosis. He refuses to accept the diagnosis, and continues to form beliefs on the basis of his visual experiences. But he has undefeated defeaters for these beliefs – because he ought to accept the diagnosis. As he leaves specsavers, he sees a peacock cross the road. Later, he tells Donna that he saw a peacock cross the road outside specsavers, but he doesn't tell her about the diagnosis. On the basis of his testimony, Donna comes to believe (truly) that a peacock crossed the road outside specsavers.

*Does Donna know there was a peacock outside specsavers?*

CONSPIRACY – CJ is a history teacher and conspiracy theorist. She firmly believes that the moon landing was a hoax. But she's read and understood the evidence that the moon landing happened, and recognizes that the moon landing 'theory' is better supported by the evidence than any other. She believes her duty as a teacher is to present the theory best supported by the evidence, so she tells her class that humans landed on the moon in 1969. CJ doesn't believe this – but her students form the corresponding true belief on the basis of her testimony.

*Do the children know humans landed on the moon?*

KARDASHIAN – Josh tells you, truly, that he saw Kim Kardashian out and about in Cambridge. You know Josh, and have good reason to trust him – he's generally reliable, and there's no reason to doubt him in this instance. So you believe that he saw Kim Kardashian. But Josh is planning to start a new company offering celebrity-spotting tours of Cambridge. He would have told you he'd seen Kim Kardashian anyway, even if he hadn't, in order to promote his business. And seeing Kim Kardashian in Cambridge is quite unlikely – meaning there's a close possible world in which Josh lied to you.

*Do you know he saw Kim Kardashian?*

These cases suggest a new condition:

**If H is to know that p on the basis of S's testimony that p, S's testimony must be *reliable* or *truth-conducive*.**

If this is right, the 'transmission' picture is wrong. Testimony can create knowledge – it is epistemically *generative*.

#### 4. The Environment

HOT FUZZ – Sergeant Angel is transferred from London to the peaceful village of Sandford. He notices a lot of freak accidents are happening. Choosing an inhabitant of Sandford at random, he asks Inspector Buttleman what's going on. It happens that Buttleman is the only person in Sandford who tells the truth to outsiders – and Buttleman tells him truthfully that there's a conspiracy by the NWA to murder non-model citizens so that Sandford will win Village of the Year. Angel believes him, having no reason not to. But if he'd asked anyone else in Sandford, they would have lied – and he'd have believed them too.

*Does Angel know that the NWA is murdering citizens?*

Perhaps:

**H can come to know that p on the basis of S's testimony only if they're in an environment which is *suitable* – i.e. not full of unreliable testifiers.**

#### Suggested Reading

J. Lackey (2006), 'Knowing from testimony,' *Philosophy Compass* 1 (5) 432-448

J. Lackey (2003), 'A minimal expression of non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony', *Nous* 37 (4) 706-723

C. Green, 'Epistemology of testimony', entry on *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* available at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-testi/> → particularly §3