

2: Non-Reductionism

1. Recap

Last week we talked about a bunch of conditions that might be required in order for a hearer H to get knowledge or justified belief that p from a speaker S's testimony that p:

- H has no undefeated defeaters for p
- H is a properly functioning recipient of testimony
- S is a reliable testifier
- S&H are in a suitable environment

There's plenty more to say about each of these conditions! But perhaps the most significant disagreement about testimony is whether a further condition has to be met in order for H's testimonially based belief that p to be justified, namely:

H has positive non-testimonial reasons for accepting S's testimony that p

2. Reductionism vs non-reductionism

Non-reductionists say no; reductionists say yes. Why is this an issue? It's about the very status of testimony as a source of knowledge & justification.

If reductionists are right, testimony isn't a basic source of knowledge & justification. When we're justified in accepting testimony, this justification comes from other sources like perception, memory & inference.

Non-reductionists dispute this: they think testimony is a basic source of knowledge & justification, just like perception, memory & inference.

Note: there are other ways of characterizing the debate:

- Liberal vs Conservative views
- Mediated vs Direct views

3. Non-Reductionism

Reid:

“[I]f credulity were the effect of reasoning and experience, it must grow up and gather strength, in the same proportion as reason and experience do. But, if it is the gift of Nature, it will be strongest in childhood, and limited and restrained by experience; and the most superficial view of human nature shews, that the last is really the case, and not the first. ... [N]ature intends that our belief should be guided by the authority and reason of others before it can be guided by our own reason.” (Reid 1764, chapter 6, section 24, at 96.)

Coady:

“I ring up the telephone company on being unable to locate my bill and am told by an anonymous voice that it comes to \$165 and is due on 15 June. No thought of determining the veracity and reliability of the witness occurs to me nor, given that the total is within tolerable limits, does the

balancing of probabilities figure in my acceptance. [...] There is nothing hesitant or suspicious about the unknown communicant's responses and I entirely believe what he says without adverting to the premisses about reliability, etc.—premisses which I am here, as so often in speech exchanges, in no position at all to investigate or independently establish. [...] It would surely be irrational to the point of insanity to withhold assent pending investigation of the respective premisses.”

Descriptive claim: we accept testimony without having positive reasons to do so.

Normative claim: we're right to accept testimony even when there's no positive reason to do so.

4. Arguments for Non-Reductionism

i. Analogy between Testimony & Perception

1. You don't need positive reasons for trusting perception for your perceptual beliefs to be justified.
2. There's no relevant difference between perception & testimony.
3. So: You don't need positive reasons for trusting testimony in order for your testimonially based beliefs to be justified.

Responses:

- Testimony is not necessarily reliable.
- Testimony is less reliable than perception.
- Testifiers, unlike perception, can intentionally deceive us.

ii. Interpretation (Coady)

1. In order to interpret a speaker's utterances, we have to assume that those utterances are, by and large, true.
2. We can interpret people's utterances.
3. So: the assumption that testimony is by and large true is vindicated, and our trust in testimony is justified.

Question: Why accept 1? Coady is drawing on the work of Donald Davidson, who argued that interpretation relies on adopting a Principle of Charity.

Responses:

- Agreement vs truth
- Can the principle of charity be applied to testimony?
- In what sense does this 'vindicate' the assumption? Is it an *epistemic* justification?

5. The 'Gullibility' Objection

ALIEN – Jeff is an average guy, walking around in his local forest, and he comes across a member of an unknown alien species. The alien's appearance enables Jeff to identify her as an alien from another planet, but he doesn't know anything about the alien or her planet. The alien approaches Jeff and utters the sounds 'giant penguins have eaten the inhabitants of my planet'. On this basis, Jeff forms the belief that giant penguins have

eaten the inhabitants of the alien's planet. As it happens, the alien is a speaker of English, she's telling the truth, and is a reliable testifier – but Jeff doesn't know any of this.

Is Jeff's belief that giant penguins have eaten the inhabitants of the alien's planet justified?

According to non-reductionism, it looks like he is. Reductionists think this is a problem: Jeff would be irrational, unjustified & gullible to believe the alien. Non-reductionism is an 'epistemic charter for the gullible and indiscriminating'.

Responses:

- Maybe Jeff doesn't lack defeaters? – This looks unconvincing.
- Maybe the problem isn't that he lacks positive reasons – but that he doesn't even know that the alien was testifying or making an assertion, because he doesn't know she speaks English. Perhaps a condition on being justified in accepting testimony is knowing you've got some testimony!

But there are two problems:

First:

MAD SCIENTIST – A mad scientist implants a chip into Donna's brain which works as follows. When she's near a fuel efficient car it randomly enters one of two states. In state 1, it does nothing and switches off. In state 2, then iff Donna does not form the intention to assert 'that's a fuel efficient car', it forces her to utter the sounds 'that's a fuel efficient car'. Donna and Josh go car shopping. Throughout the course of the afternoon, Donna utters 'that's a fuel efficient car' many times – and on most of these occasions, it's the chip making her do it. At 4pm, she sees a fuel efficient car, considers whether to say that it's fuel efficient, and at the last moment decides she will. So she asserts 'that's a fuel efficient car' – and Josh comes to believe this on the basis of her assertion.

Does Josh know that it's a fuel efficient car? Does he know she's making an assertion?

It looks like Josh has knowledge from Donna's testimony, but doesn't know she was testifying.

Second:

The response addresses only part of the problem. Even if Jeff had reason to think the alien was speaking English, he knows nothing about this alien, her species or culture – for all he knows, she could be a serial liar or following some societal convention according to which you say the opposite of what you mean. So reductionists will still think he'd be gullible to believe her.

Suggested Reading

C.A.J. Coady (1992), *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, chapters 4 and 9

Catherine Elgin (2002), 'Take it from me', *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 65: 291-308

Peter Graham (2006), 'Liberal fundamentalism and its rivals', in Lackey & Sosa (eds) *The Epistemology of Testimony*

Jennifer Lackey (2008), 'It takes two to tango', in Lackey & Sosa

Andrew Peet (forthcoming), 'Testimonial knowledge without knowledge of what is said', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*