

3: Reductionism

1. Recap

Last week we introduced the dispute between *non-reductionists* and *reductionists* about testimony.

Non-Reductionism: You DON'T need positive non-testimonial reasons for accepting S's testimony that p to be justified in accepting it.

Reductionism: You DO need positive non-testimonial reasons for accepting S's testimony that p to be justified in accepting it.

Last week we focused on arguments for & against non-reductionism. This week we'll talk about reductionism.

2. Reductionism

'Our psychological attitude toward what another tells us is to accept what we are told *only* given the presence of further background beliefs [...] These beliefs allow us to support acceptance with the judgment that the testimony is *credible*. It is doxastically irresponsible to accept testimony without some background belief in the testimony's credibility or truth' (Faulkner)

Descriptive claim: We don't accept testimony unless we have some reason for thinking it's credible.

Normative claim: It would be unjustified to accept testimony without some reason for thinking it's credible.

3. Some Positive Arguments

i. Operational Dependence

Testimony is operationally dependent on perception: in order to receive testimony, we have to hear or otherwise perceive it.

Response: That's true! But it doesn't show that testimony derives its *justificatory power* from perception. A priori inferences sometimes depend on perception in the same way.

ii. From No-Defeaters to Positive Reasons

Once you accept a no-defeaters condition on testimony, there's no good reason not to accept the positive reason condition. To do so is to occupy an 'untenable halfway house'.

Response: Why accept this?!

4. Global Reduction

Hume:

‘The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians is not derived from any connexion, which we perceive a priori, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them’

‘[W]e may observe, that there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. [...] our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. [...] Were not the memory tenacious to a certain degree; had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity; were they not sensible to shame, when detected in a falsehood: were not these, I say, discovered by *experience* to be qualities, inherent in human nature, we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony. A man delirious, or noted for falsehood and villainy, has no manner of authority with us.’

i.e. we’re justified in accepting testimony because we know from experience that testimony is *generally* reliable.

Global Reductionism: Justification for a testimonial belief that p depends on having positive reasons for thinking that testimony *in general* is reliable.

i. The Fieldwork Objection

On this view, in order to have any testimonially justified beliefs, we need adequate reasons for thinking testimony, as a whole, is reliable. But we simply do not have such reasons! None of us have done ‘anything like the amount of fieldwork’ that this would require. (Coady).

NB – The view is an *individualistic* one – it requires that each agent *individually* has reasons for thinking testimony is reliable. That means you have to do all the justificatory work yourself.

We can break the problem down into three parts:

SAMPLE SIZE: I have experienced a tiny, non-representative sample of testimony – a handful of reports from English speakers native to the south of England.

CHECKING: Within that sample, in many (perhaps most) cases, I haven’t/couldn’t check the report against the fact – e.g. mathematical/scientific theories, the distant past, etc. Those reports I *have* checked are even less representative.

CROSS-CONTAMINATION: Much of what I take for granted is itself based on testimony. In checking reports against facts, I can’t rely on anything I learned from testimony. But that’s almost everything – so how could I conduct a proper investigation?

Worry: Combined with some plausible assumptions, GR seems to entail an unacceptable amount of scepticism.

Responses:

- Our inductive base is not that weak! Over the course of life, we verify many instances of testimony. What matters is not the proportion of beliefs you've checked, but the proportion of checks that have positive results.
- Even if we haven't explicitly verified the reliability of testimony, the extent to which we rely on testimony itself leads to confirmation of the reliability of testimony.
 - o Beliefs based on testimony are central to our web of beliefs.
 - o On the basis of this web of beliefs, we form many expectations.
 - o Each time these expectations are confirmed, this tacitly confirms the underlying assumption that testimony is credible.

ii. The Heterogeneity Objection

Suppose we could overcome the fieldwork objection. Suppose we conducted the relevant investigation and discovered testimony was 80% reliable. Would that be significant?

The concern is that testimony is not an interestingly unified category.

Response: We could carve up the data more finely – and get degrees of reliability for types of testimony.

Problem: Is there any objective way to carve testimony up into types?

5. Local Reduction

Local reduction: In order to be justified in accepting a speaker's testimony, I must have non-testimonial positive reasons for thinking that *this particular report* is reliable.

i. The Strangers Objection

We often acquire testimonial knowledge from people about whom we know next to nothing. Take the case where you ask a stranger for directions to the train station and she gives you a truthful answer. It's plausible you end up with knowledge of the train station's location in this case. But according to LR, it looks like you don't – because you know nothing about this person.

Responses:

- Interpreting others involves constructing a 'theory' of them; estimates of sincerity & competence are part of this theory. Constructing the theory is an exercise in *common sense psychology*. In constructing the theory, you have to be alert for signs of insincerity.
 - o *Problem:* What is being alert for signs of insincerity? Isn't it just watching out for defeaters?
- Argue that we do have positive reasons in this case. That's what distinguishes this from the ALIEN case we talked about last week.

ii. The Infant/Child Objection

Infants & children acquire testimonial knowledge from their caregivers & teachers. It's doubtful that they possess – or even have the capacity to possess – positive reasons for accepting what they're told. E.g. An 18 month old learns from her parent that cows go moo. It's plausible to say that she knows cows go moo. But does she have positive reasons for accepting her parent's testimony?

Responses:

- Why think the infant lacks positive reasons?
- This is a problem for everyone:
 1. To be justified in accepting testimony, you have to have no undefeated defeaters.
 2. You also have to be a properly functioning recipient of testimony – i.e. be appropriately sensitive to defeaters. (Lecture 1).
 3. A defeater is just a negative reason – a reason for doubting the trustworthiness/credibility/truth of testimony.
 4. If infants can't have positive reasons, they can't have negative reasons either.
 5. Therefore: they can't satisfy the condition in premise 2
 6. Therefore: they can't have justified testimonial beliefs.

Lackey (2006): 'If, as proponents of the ICO contend, infants and young children are cognitively incapable of having positive reasons, they are incapable of having negative reasons. Reasons are reasons, whether they are for or against holding a particular belief. In this way, positive reasons and normative defeaters go hand in hand.'

Options:

- Accept that infants/young children don't have the knowledge they seem to have.
- Argue that infants & young children *do* have the capacity to be sensitive to reasons.
- Say that justification requires different things at different life stages.

Suggested Reading

C.A.J. Coady, (1992), *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, chapter 4
Elizabeth Fricker (1994), 'Against gullibility', in Chakrabarty & Matilal (eds) *Knowing From Words*
Jennifer Lackey (2005), 'Testimony and the infant child objection', *Philosophical Studies* 126 (2), 163-190