

What is the reductionist position as regards the epistemology of testimonial belief? Is such a view defensible, do you think? By Andrew Webb

Testimony plays an important role in helping us to form beliefs and acquire knowledge. Whether we receive this testimony through verbal, written or alternative means, it is clear that we rely a great deal on the testimony of others rather than by finding out truths ourselves (Pritchard: 2014: 80). This way of gaining knowledge - through the transmission of information - means that we are not restricted to only forming beliefs that we can ourselves ascertain or substantiate. Testimony that is false or misleading, however, challenges our ability to form true beliefs and acquire knowledge. Since, in practical terms, we cannot *independently* verify all of the testimony which we encounter - however suspicious or surprising we may find it - the problematic nature of testimonial knowledge asserts itself as it appears as though such knowledge rests on uncertain grounds (ibid: 82). Reductionism, following Hume, seeks to respond to this problem by claiming the need for non-testimonial support, for example, through personal experience of an informant's reliability, as justification for testimony-based beliefs (ibid: 87). Testimonial justification is thereby 'reduced' to non-testimonial justification. This position, however, invites further epistemological complications.

The reductionist position gets around the problem of circular justification (in the sense of justifying testimonial knowledge through recourse to further testimony) but falters when we more closely investigate the distinctions surrounding our understandings of 'local' and 'non-local' beliefs. In Pritchard's example of *The Truman Show* (ibid: 81-4) the eponymous hero is able to reach true 'local' beliefs on matters relating to his immediate environment (such as whether the newspaper shop is open), as he is able to independently verify what is being asserted, or make a judgement about the reliability of the informant by drawing on past experience. Truman is unable to verify his 'non-local' beliefs, however, since there is no inherent reason that informants reliable on 'local' matters will be equally so in regards to 'non-local' matters (ibid: 83). The very fact that Truman's life is actually an elaborately constructed reality TV show magnifies this problem since Truman's informants are engaged in an ongoing process of deception by controlling and mediating the kinds of 'non-local' beliefs he forms (for example, the very 'ordinariness' of his suburban life in Seahaven). Truman, unable to verify these 'non-local' beliefs, falls prey to testimonial deceit. Pritchard's analogy of *The Truman Show* highlights our own fallibility as knowers since - under the terms of reductionism - we, too, are unable to verify our own 'non-local' beliefs through non-testimonial support, leaving our claims to knowledge of 'non-local' matters on weak footing. It is this understanding of the 'class' of 'non-local' testimony-based beliefs that seems to most profoundly weaken the reductionist position (ibid: 84).

In contrast, credulism, following Reid, argues for the presumption in favour of accepting testimonial belief as justified unless there exists special reason for doubt (ibid: 84). Whereas reductionism calls into question

the foundations of much of what we commonly believe we know, credulism suggests that we need not worry about the need for independent grounds for 'non-local' testimony-based beliefs since such beliefs can be rightly held without further justification. Under these terms, Truman, for example, is justified in holding his 'non-local' beliefs until the point at which he is confronted with shattering counter-evidence regarding the *unreality* of his apparently normal life. This common-sense aspect to credulism - a rational inclination to trust the testimony we receive - brings advantages and challenges: for while it perhaps allows us to more readily acquire new beliefs and to be more 'secure' in accepting the testimony-based beliefs we already hold as genuine instances of knowledge, it seems also to potentially leave us more exposed to beliefs that are false or misleading. The charge against credulism, then, is that it might be thought to 'license gullibility' (ibid: 88) and give rise to irrationality or intellectual irresponsibility (Lackey: 2011: 319). In the case of Truman, it is clear that his credulist outlook serves to facilitate the continuation of the wider testimonial deceit that is visited upon him by his informants and the TV show's makers. It is also true that many of the testimony-based beliefs that we have previously held across different periods and areas of knowledge - for example, in history and science - have been forced to shift once supporting evidence has reconfigured our understandings of that knowledge (for example, knowledge of the earth's shape or advances in best medical treatments). Though credulism removes many of the restrictions on what we may justifiably believe (Pritchard: 84), in some cases we may not necessarily be better off if we fail to exercise adequate critical engagement - scrutiny - in regards to the testimony we encounter.

One way in which the credulist position may be strengthened in response to such objections is through the application of epistemic externalism (ibid: 85). In this case, the fact of presumption of the 'innocence' of the testimony could be supported by the claim that trusting testimony is a generally reliable way of forming belief (ibid: 85). In Lackey's example of seeking directions for the Chicago Navy Pier from a passerby (Lackey: 320), most would agree that such a transaction would result in gaining positive testimony regarding the location of Navy Pier, despite there being little support the agent could herself offer in favour of the belief presented. In such everyday situations, we may presume that the informant has no rational motivation to lie, and therefore it would appear sound epistemic practice to accept her testimony as reliable (Adler: 2012). It is also the case that some forms of testimony transmission, such as that naturally occurring between teachers and students and parents and their offspring, are generally accepted (albeit somewhat problematically) as epistemically rational ways of acquiring knowledge about the wider world *without* the need for further tests (Lackey: 320). The widespread acceptance of these models of testimony transmission suggests that credulism retains its currency in contexts wherein a process of reliable exchange appears evident.

In contrast, the high hurdle of scrutiny imposed by reductionism may itself be advantageous in contexts necessitating a defence against threats of gullibility. It is surely wise practice, for example, to question and seek evaluation of the testimony of political figures - especially those whose motives in espousing certain kinds of testimony may be bound up with particular career goals. If, in fact, we know or suspect such instances, we are likely to instinctively apply greater scrutiny to those claims than we would in the kinds of day-to-day transactional exchanges previously alluded to (Pritchard: 81). This practice of dealing with problematic testimony, however, does not substantially alter our reliance on testimony *per se* (ibid: 81). In the courtroom, for example, we presume the defendant's innocence until proof of guilt is established. The probing and scrutiny of witness testimony navigates a careful path between being along credulist and reductionist lines. While some forms of testimony may be taken at face value, others - especially those judged essential in determining the relative innocence of the defendant - will likely require recourse to expert testimony (the forensic analyst who can verify the provenance of a vital piece of DNA evidence) or non-testimonial justification (CCTV footage from the crime scene). In this instance, the process applied seems to balance the reductionist need for establishing solid grounds for knowledge (within practical limits) against dodging the potential failings of naive credulism. Although this process of verifying knowledge and establishing justification is itself problematic on an operational level, it does tread a usefully pragmatic line that accommodates divergent ways of negotiating testimonial knowledge.

The problem of testimonial knowledge forces us to re-consider the epistemological grounds that underpin the way in which we receive and regard testimony as a source of knowledge. Whereas credulism argues that we are entitled to our hold testimony-based beliefs without further independent support, the reductionist position argues that such beliefs need to be credibly tethered to some form of non-testimonial support. The practical impossibility of verifying much of the testimony we acquire therefore casts doubt on what we may justifiably claim as instances of knowledge - particularly the important class of beliefs concerned with 'non-local' matters. Whilst the pragmatism of credulism weighs favourably against that of reductionism, it remains problematic to assert that either position offers more solid grounds for knowledge given the vexed nature of our epistemological relationship with testimonial knowledge.

Bibliography

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