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The Epistemic Justification of Testimony-Based Beliefs: between Knowledge and Faith

I. Testimony-based beliefs, their justification and testimonial knowledge: a general overview

Until recently, testimony was an underestimated and underexplored theme in epistemology. It was so despite the fact that our constant, extensive and unavoidable reliance on testimony when forming most of our beliefs is unquestionable. Few philosophers in history devoted their attention to the topic; David Hume, Thomas Reid and Bertrand Russell, to mention some famous names, were those who cared to discuss testimony in the epistemological context more extensively than a brief remark.[1] Considering how much of what we know comes from broadly understood testimony provided by other people, that disparaging attitude to testimony-generated knowledge requires some explanation.

The problem of the status of testimony as a source of knowledge is concerned with its reliability, and, in consequence, with the justification of our beliefs. The Gettier problem aside (Gettier 1963), for a long time, knowledge has been defined as a justified true belief (JTB).[2] What may count as a justifier, i.e., a legitimate reason for holding or forming a belief, has always been the big question in epistemology, at least in the part of it that has opposed skepticism. The main problem with testimony is that we extensively rely on it when forming our beliefs, these beliefs are mostly true,

[1] Cf. Coady (1992: 5-24); in the last twenty years, testimony has become a more fashionable topic in epistemology, and the literature on it has grown considerably; see Lackey, Sosa, eds. (2006); Zagzebski (2012), McMyler (2011), Goldberg (2010), Faulkner (2011).

[2] For the discussion of the problems for JTB theories, see Zagzebski (1996: 283-292).

however – according to many philosophers – they do not seem to be justified sufficiently enough to give them the name of knowledge.

That lack of proper justification, which is inherent in testimony, results from the obvious fact that we do not have an insight into the truth value of what is asserted by someone else, which would be comparable to the privileged access to our own memory or perception, and to the truth value of what we assert. The situation is even worse; we usually accept testimony at face value, only on the word of the person who testifies, but, clearly, that person does not have to be competent or sincere. Therefore, the reliability of testimony is inherently uncertain; on the basis of what other people say we may form true beliefs or false beliefs, so dependence on testimony is not, in general, an infallible epistemic strategy. Hence, according to many philosophers representing traditional Cartesian-style epistemological individualism, testimony-based beliefs are not *epistemically* justified, and, therefore, they do not make *knowledge*. According to other philosophers, especially those representing a more recent epistemology, that inherent lack of certainty in testimonial beliefs can be overcome, and such beliefs can be regarded as justified, and, if true, they will constitute knowledge.

In the epistemology of testimony there have emerged two main approaches to the problem of justification. The first, *reductionism*, claims that testimony can give us knowledge, but it requires justification from other, more fundamental, sources of belief, like inference, memory or perception, because it ultimately depends on them. Thus, the chain of testimony's justification must start in a person who knows directly, for example, by perception[3], or, alternatively, justification for testimonial belief is derived from our own inferential reasoning on the basis of available evidence that the testimony is truthful (cf. Fumerton 2006: 80).

Proponents of the second approach, *anti-reductionists*, claim that testimony as a source of knowledge does not have to be justified by appeal to inference, perception or memory, because testimony is a source of justification in itself. Our reliance on testimony is justified *a priori* – by our human constitution and our being members of an epistemic community, sharing a language and a body of common beliefs. Anti-reductionists argue that reductionism is in fact not very different from epistemological individualism, because a belief based on testimony is expected to be ultimately justified by an *individual's* memory, perception or inference – so it lacks a truly 'social' character (cf. Coady 1992, McMyler 2011).

[3] This approach assumes externalist justification (Goldman 2012); see 'the extendedness hypothesis' in Goldberg (2010: 79-104).

In what follows, testimony will be understood in a very broad sense of the term, not limited to legal and institutional contexts. In this broad interpretation, testimony is a speech act of asserting that *p* by a competent and non-malevolent speaker. The assertion is typically expressed in a declarative sentence, is relevant to the issue discussed and is directed to the addressee who is in need of that information. Also, the speaker's assertion that *p* is meant to be understood literally, is not supported by other testimony or evidence, hence the addressee has no other corroborative source of information on the issue but the speaker's word. Moreover, the addressee has no special insight into the speaker's actual competence, authority and good intentions; she has no reason to doubt them, but she also knows that the speaker, as any other human, could lie or be mistaken. Our understanding of the term 'testimony' throughout this paper will correspond to Coady's notion of *natural testimony* (1992: 25ff), Jonathan Adler (2012), and other accounts of testimony found in recent epistemological literature (see footnote 1 above).

Having defined testimony along the above lines, we can go on to the fundamental question of whether, in such circumstances, the addressee of testimony has any good reason to ascribe competence and truthfulness to the speaker and let herself believe the speaker's word. The next question that closely follows is whether testimony-based beliefs, if true, deserve to be called knowledge. If we assume that it is so, and such beliefs can be epistemically justified, the question arises of whether we can learn from the word of others just like we can learn from perception or inference (i.e., testimony is simply one of many possible sources of evidence, on a par with others), or, due to its being mediated by other persons, testimony-based knowledge has a special epistemic status. These questions sum up the core problems of the justification of testimony-based beliefs. The following two sections will discuss two epistemological traditions providing two different answers to them.

In part II of the paper, we will discuss the tradition of epistemological individualism and its rationale, as well as some attempts, within that tradition, to include testimony-based beliefs to the body of legitimate and rationally held beliefs. The anti-reductionist approach, most prominent in Thomas Reid's philosophy, as well as some reductionist counterarguments, will be discussed in part III. Our final conclusion will be that testimony can provide justified beliefs; that is, it can transfer knowledge, but the anti-reductionist view that testimony-based knowledge is irreducibly second-personal, direct and non-inferential in nature is difficult to maintain.

II. Testimonial beliefs, knowledge and faith in the tradition of epistemological individualism

That testimony cannot be regarded as an adequate source of knowledge was clear to Plato and other ancient philosophers. In *Theaetetus* (xxxviii), testimony in a law case is mentioned briefly to illustrate the thesis that knowledge cannot be defined as true belief. It is not possible because one cannot possess *knowledge* on the basis of testimony, though on that basis one can surely form true opinions and beliefs. In the dialogue, Theaetetus tentatively suggests identifying knowledge with true opinion, to which Socrates answers that 'a whole profession' would be against equating the two. Since we can *know* matters like robbery or violence only by seeing them, and we cannot know them from reports by others, testimony cannot be counted as a source of knowledge. One may acquire true beliefs about what happened by being informed or persuaded by eye-witnesses or other people, but one could never be said to *know* in that way what happened. A true belief formed on the basis of someone's testimony is not *knowledge*; it is merely a true belief.

Let us remember at this point that Plato was in fact very far from regarding sensory perception as a source of true and noteworthy knowledge. His stance was that reason alone can yield genuine knowledge (*episteme*) – the type of knowledge which is certain, clear and universal, able to discern eternal Forms from everyday, perishable objects that only reflect those Forms (*The Republic*, Book V). To Plato, like to many other ancient philosophers, sensory experience did not count much, it could generate practical, everyday knowledge, which the Greeks named *doxa*, but that was not knowledge in the proper sense of the term.[4] Earlier in the same dialogue, it is stated explicitly that perception through senses does not provide true knowledge. Thus, by contrasting testimony with sensory perception (unreliable itself), Plato seems to deny that the former has any epistemological status whatsoever. In fact, for the participants of the dialogue that inferiority assigned to testimony appears quite obvious, and the argument does not call for further explanation. For the Greeks, knowledge had to be a result of one's individual sound reasoning from first principles because only this epistemic ideal gives us a thorough, systematic and clear understanding that is required for knowledge.

That relegation of testimony from epistemological framework continued for a long time. Various sources of knowledge were highlighted in the history of Western philosophy; depending on the general philosophical commitments

[4] Cf. Łukasiewicz (2010).

of the authors, these were deductive reasoning, sensory perception, intuition or illumination. However, the most basic and common source was somewhat absent from the theoretical reflection on knowledge. As explained above, this neglect was largely due to the dominant view of knowledge as *scientia* or *episteme*, i.e., a rational and thorough understanding of the phenomenon in question, which is lacking when we rely only on the word of others. However, it can also be explained by the influence of epistemic individualism – the Early Modern view that the autonomous epistemic agent is solely responsible for the quality of her beliefs and should come to her own conclusions regarding their justifiedness.

Before we discuss the emergence of modern epistemic individualism, we need to underline one important issue. This neglect of others' testimony as a source of *knowledge* in Western philosophy did not mean lack of reliance on *authority*, i.e., the authority of the teacher or the authority of texts. Just the opposite, for centuries, if one wanted to find answers to any of the fundamental questions about God, life, the natural world or the soul, one would turn to the classical authoritative texts: the Bible, the writings of Church Fathers, Plato, Aristotle, and others. However, beliefs (testimonial in nature) based on authority did not constitute knowledge – due to the foregoing constraints on what knowledge (*scientia*) requires. Such beliefs enjoyed their own category; they were a matter of *faith*. But significantly, following someone's authority was a perfectly legitimate way to form beliefs (see McMyler 2011: 18-20). The categories of knowledge and faith were conceived of as distinct, but both were reliable strategies to acquire true beliefs.

As noted by Coady (1992: 16-17), Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*, does not consider testimony a source of *knowledge* since knowledge must be 'naturally possible to our understanding'. However, our belief in the testimony of others, which is a species of *faith*, is necessary:

> ... it is needful that he [man] be able to stand with as much certainty on what another knows but of which he himself is ignorant, as upon the truths which he himself knows. Hence it is that in human society faith is necessary in order that one man give credence to the words of another, and this is the foundation of justice ... (Aquinas, *De Trinitate*, qu. III, art. i. 3)

The problem of how to treat authority-based belief in relation to knowledge is also mentioned in Augustine's writings, though the divide is less obvious in this case. On the one hand, Augustine is clear that, strictly speaking, we may *know* only by the light of reason, through a kind of intellectual perception, and we cannot be said to *know* on the basis of reliable authority, nor sense perception. On the other hand, there are passages, for

example, in *Retractationes*, where he seems to admit that testimony, like sense perception, gives *knowledge*:

> And when I said … 'What we know, therefore, we owe to reason, what we believe, to authority', this is not to be taken in such a way as to make us frightened in more ordinary conversation of saying that we know that we believe on adequate testimony. It is true that when we keep to the proper acceptation of the term we say we know only that which we grasp by firm reasoning of the mind. But when we speak in language more suited to common use, as even the Holy Scripture speaks, we should not hesitate to say that we know both what we perceive by our bodily senses and what we believe on the authority of trustworthy witnesses, while nevertheless understanding the distance between these and that. (*Retractationes*, I. xiii. 3)

However, it is difficult to weave the above declaration into Augustine's overall epistemological framework, where the requirement that knowledge be generated by reason appears fundamental, whereas sense perception and testimony provide us with useful beliefs only, to which one could apply the name of knowledge only through a (harmless and common) misuse of the term.[5]

The division into beliefs based on our own reasoning, which yield knowledge, and testimonial beliefs based on authority, which generate faith, is still to be found in the seventeenth-century *Logic or the Art of Thinking* by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole (the so-called *Port Royal Logic*):

> For there are two general paths that lead us to believe that something is true. The first is knowledge we have of it ourselves, from having recognized and examined the truth either by the senses or by reason. This can generally be called *reason*, because the senses themselves depend on a judgment by reason ….
>
> The other path is the authority of persons worthy of credence who assure us that a certain thing exists, although by ourselves we know nothing about it. This is called faith or belief, following the saying of St. Augustine: *Quod scimus, debemus rationi, quod credimus, autoritati* [What we know we owe to reason, what we believe, to authority]. (Arnauld, Nicole 1996 [1662]: 260)

For the authors of *Port Royal Logic*, there was nothing inherently wrong about relying on the authority of others when forming our beliefs; such

[5] For more on the tension in Augustine's writings between the purely intellectual, reason-based interpretation of knowledge and a more practical approach to it, see Coady (1992: 18-21).

beliefs were just of a different type when compared with reason-based knowledge.[6]

However, the notion of *authority* and the trust in someone's authority – capable of justifying our beliefs in matters we do not know by ourselves – were very soon to disappear from theoretical considerations on belief and what may constitute a legitimate reason for holding a belief. We could say that the modern mind-set was born in the crisis of that authority. The questioning of hitherto well-established views permeated many domains of life at the beginning of the modern period, from traditional beliefs about one's placement in the social hierarchy to the views of the world, religion and science. The latter was no longer done by consulting authoritative textbooks; the new approach to science meant building it on observation and empirical research. Also in epistemology, the beginning of modernity was marked by an individualist search for truth and the emergence of a new source of certainty – the self. In epistemological individualism, one has to figure things out for oneself, as individual, in one's own mind.

Why should we start that search for truth with ourselves? Because not only authorities are unreliable, but our sensory perception of the world is unreliable as well. Since, as Descartes's *Cogito* argument has it, we can be massively deceived or mistaken in our judgment as to anything external, even as to the existence of the external world, the only thing we cannot possibly doubt is the existence of our mental states and there we should start when looking for certainty. The concept of knowledge did not change with regard to the requirements of certainty and clarity; Descartes's project of turning to the subject and the self continued the long, ancient tradition of regarding knowledge as *episteme* or *scientia*. If what we know deserves the name of knowledge, it has to be certain, unshakeable and accessible to thorough understanding. That epistemological individualism, so conspicuous in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, naturally ruled out the possibility that testimony might play any significant role in the theoretical reflection on knowledge.

But since authority was no longer a parallel source of legitimate beliefs, next to reason, and in this way the traditional connection between authority-based faith and testimonial beliefs was broken, the latter were now left without their previous stronghold in the cognitive framework. Testimony-based beliefs became a problematic issue because, surely, the actual role of testimony when forming beliefs in everyday life, in scientific practice, in

[6] According to McMyler (2011: 22-37), this approach to authority-based beliefs as legitimate *sui generis* beliefs, which are unlike those based on rational evidence, explains how the authors of *Logic* could come to conclusions so different from Hume's (see *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*) regarding the belief in the occurrence of miracles.

religious matters, etc. was as fundamental as ever and one could not just dismiss this fact. On the other hand, it was difficult to theoretically account for their justifiedness once authority as the warrant had been negated (McMyler 2011: 23-29).

Descartes is quite explicit that reliance on the testimony of others, as present, for example, in the process of education, is in fact harmful to our intellect. Teachers' (mis)guidance diminishes our intellectual powers:

> … hence I thought it virtually impossible that our judgements should be as unclouded and firm as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by reason alone. (*Discourse on the Method*: 117)

And, later, he continues the praise of individualistic search for truth:

> … and yet a majority vote is worthless as a proof of truths that are at all difficult to discover; for a single man is much more likely to hit upon them than a group of people. (*Discourse on the Method*: 119)

British empiricism, whose main interest was theory of knowledge, developed in opposition to the seventeenth-century rationalism and Descartes's views on how we come to indubitable knowledge, but it definitely shared the epistemological individualism of the latter. Individualistic search for truth and one's autonomy therein were very prominent features of John Locke's ethics of belief. It assumed that we, as individuals, have certain moral duties about how we form our beliefs, and, importantly, we can be held responsible if we fail to do our best to avoid false beliefs. How to avoid false beliefs? Foremost, we are supposed to form our beliefs rationally and we are to pursue this task individually. Locke insists that we, as individuals, are responsible for figuring out what is a true belief and a false one; we will not achieve this aim by reverting to authorities, reading authoritative texts or by believing what other people tell us.

> … we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative Knowledge, if we sought it in the Fountain, in the consideration of Things themselves; and made use rather of our own Thoughts, than other Men's to find it. For, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other Men's Eyes, as to know by other Men's Understandings. So much as we our selves consider and comprehend of Truth and Reason, so much we possess of real and true Knowledge. The floating of other Men's Opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was Science, is in us but Opiniatry, whilst we give up our Assent only to reverend Names, and do not, as they did, employ our own Reason to understand those Truths which gave them reputation. … In the Sciences, every one has so much, as he really knows and

> comprehends: What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreds; which however well in the whole piece, make no considerable addition to his stock, who gathers them. (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I: 58)

In that individual epistemic effort, we should rationally assess which of our beliefs have the strongest evidence, which of them have weaker evidence, and, accordingly, we should proportion the strength of our belief to the strength of our evidence – that was the key idea of Locke's *evidentialism*. It was an important and fairly new idea that we as individuals are morally responsible for assessing evidence for our beliefs. We are not allowed to believe something more strongly than the evidence allows us to believe, and we don't have a right to our beliefs if we do not have any evidence for them. In Locke's epistemology, the questions of how we form our beliefs and which of them are justified are ethical issues, inherently connected with our responsibility as epistemic agents (Wolterstorff 1996: 218-226).

Is there any room in that ambitious epistemological project for the testimony of others? Certainly not if testimony-based beliefs are to be justified by the *authority* of the testifier. However, notwithstanding the above individualistic rhetoric, later in his *Essay* Locke does admit that we sometimes need to rely on the testimony of others and we can be justified in it. However, first, the testimony must be sufficiently credible, and, second, we should rely on the argument itself, not on the authority. Therefore, someone's testimony may generate a rational and 'probable' belief, but that belief will not amount to knowledge, and, what is important, one must examine the argument of the testifier by oneself, go through the testifier's reasoning, assess the proofs provided and then judge the probability of what is asserted. In sum, in a testimony-based belief that *p*, one cannot rely on the authority of the testifier and, in the absence of defeaters, derive justification from that authority. The testimony is to be taken as any other ordinary inductive evidence in favour of *p*; it has to be worked through and one must come to one's own conclusions regarding the probability that *p*. The degree of one's belief that *p* is to be proportionate to the weight of the evidence possessed. Let us note at this point that these are very high standards that Locke proposes to adopt. Normally, we do not have much evidence for most things we believe on the basis of testimony, nor are we able to work through someone's argument and judge the soundness of her reasoning. In everyday communication in most cases we simply take the word of others as warrant, so we rely on their authority – to this problem we will return in part III.

Thus understood testimonial beliefs are, as McMyler (2011: 24-31) argues, quite compatible with Locke's epistemic individualism. However, they are no longer *sui generis* beliefs (i.e., based on authority) – their content

is to be evaluated as probable or improbable like any other evidence. That is also how testimonial beliefs are construed by David Hume. In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume writes:

> ... there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary in human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators (1999 [1748]: 111)

Hume is quite appreciative of the role that testimony plays in our reasoning[7], but his approving account thereof – surely more sympathetic than Locke's – does not implicate that he understands the justification of testimony-based beliefs differently. Analogically to Locke, Hume is clear that testimonial beliefs cannot be justified by the authority of the testifier and our trust in that authority; his approach clearly contrasts with the above-quoted Arnauld and Nicole's *Logic*. In Hume, testimonial beliefs are just a species of belief based on inference, in which we have to judge from various relevant data the probability of the fact testified to (i.e., whether it corresponds to what we have learned and experienced so far), as well as to assess the trustworthiness of the speaker.

To sum up, within Locke's and Hume's individualist framework, what justifies our testimonial belief that *p* is the strength of the inference from the fact of someone's testifying that *p* to our own conclusion that *p*. The degree of justification for our testimonial belief that *p* is proportionate to the strength of that inference. This is the essence of the *reductionist* view – testimonial beliefs are legitimate, but they are justified through the individual's inferential reasoning and the believer alone is responsible for the justification of her belief.

However, these ideals of epistemic autonomy and epistemic responsibility may seem at odds with how we actually form our beliefs. Most of them are based on testimony and taken as *prima facie* justified. We trust the word of others in innumerable matters, from the details of our personal history, like the date of birth, the name we were given, the exact time of the present moment and countless other things, to most beliefs we hold about the past and present of the external world. That is the way we form our beliefs and it would be folly, someone might say, to claim that we do not *know* the multitude of more and less important things that we actually know just because we choose to interpret the notion of knowledge as narrowly as in the above-presented individualist epistemology. It is against common sense to say

[7] Due attention must be paid to Hume's declaration that reasoning based on testimony is not exempt from his more general refutation of the relation of cause and effect. Therefore, the trustworthiness of testimonial beliefs amounts to the mere *regularity of the conjunction* between people's reports and relevant facts (see Hume 1999 [1748]: 111-112).

that we cannot *know* the date of our birth because we learned about it from others' testimony, and therefore it is a matter of faith, as in the foregoing passage from *Port Royal Logic*, or that we cannot *know* it unless we thoroughly examined the relevant proofs and reasoning providing justification for that belief, as in the reductionist view. Those who advocate the anti-reductionist solution to the problem of the justification of testimonial knowledge (see below) argue that such skepticism or epistemic caution lead to absurdity and it does not make sense to doubt testimony-based beliefs if we have no other choice but to accept them.

III. The anti-reductionist approach to testimonial beliefs: can knowledge be based on testimony itself?

Thomas Reid was one of those few philosophers who voiced the opinion of probably many people suspicious of the above-outlined epistemological individualism. In accordance with his philosophy of *Common Sense*, Reid claims that it is futile to try to justify the immense body of true beliefs that we owe to others and their reports by consulting our own intellectual resources only – in that case we would be left with little knowledge indeed. He illustrates the epistemic importance of others' testimony with an example of a mathematician who, having made a mathematical discovery, will naturally seek to check the opinion of his epistemic peers, other mathematicians. According to their verdict, he will either become more confident about his discovery if their judgment is favourable, or, if it is unfavourable, he will bring his discovery back into suspense and will thoroughly reexamine his reasoning.[8] And rightly so, Reid would say, because our peers' judgments provide us with the most important test of the objectivity and truthfulness of our own views; even in the domain where proof is based on deductive reasoning, not on authority, like mathematics.

In contrast to Hume and other reductionists, Reid claims that our capacity to acquire knowledge from the testimony of others cannot be reduced to the operation of our capacity for inferential thinking – the former is as fundamental in us as the latter. In communication with other people, we are naturally inclined to follow two principles, which might be considered two sides of one coin: *the principle of veracity* and *the principle of credulity* (Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, chapter VI. xxiv: 193-194). The first principle is 'a propensity to speak truth, and to use the signs of language so as to convey our real sentiments'. As argued by Reid, truth is 'the natural issue of

[8] Cf. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay VI, chapter v: 440.

the mind', to speak truth one needs no training nor encouragement, but it is enough that one's natural impulse be followed. Even for those people who very frequently lie, the proportion of true testimony they give outweighs by far the occurrences of lying. The principle of credulity, in turn, says that humans quite naturally tend to believe what they are told. This disposition is most compelling in young children; it is their normal attitude to believe what other people tell them and this allows them to learn their language and a multitude of other useful things. If they adopted the method of Cartesian universal doubt, or even a neutral attitude to what they are told, it would be detrimental to their proper development and well-being. Later, that natural disposition to believe others is somewhat lessened and qualified by the experience of deceit and corruption. In adulthood, our reason 'learns to suspect testimony in some cases, and to disbelieve it in others; and sets bounds to that authority to which she was at first entirely subject' (Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, chapter VI. xxiv: 197). But still, even in adults, the occasionally critical opinions and negative feelings about others' testimony are founded upon the dominant and pervasive attitude of trust. That trust in others' word works analogically to the trust in our memory; the awareness that our memory sometimes fails us does not call into question our general and mostly unreflective reliance on it. Similarly, the awareness that others' testimony may be fallible at times does not undermine the direct and immediate operation of the credulity principle.

Surely, we cannot count if indeed the number of testimony-based beliefs which proved true is bigger than the number of testimony-based beliefs that proved false. As Henry H. Price puts it in his *Belief*, our capacity to test and verify testimony by ourselves is too limited when compared with the overall number of testimonial beliefs we hold to justify any inductive claim – positive or negative – as to the reliability of testimony (1969: 119). If verifiable numbers cannot reveal the predominance of true over false testimony, then what supports the veracity principle?

One could argue that we would not believe testimony if our past experience of it did not inform us that testimony is largely true. Thus, we keep a sort of mental record of its reliability. Price may be right that we are unable to count and compare the actual number of true testimonial beliefs and the number of false testimonial beliefs, but it is possible to claim that testimony is *predominantly* true. This claim is warranted because if testimony were not more often true than not, we would not be willing to accept it and, in consequence, we would not have any testimonial beliefs. Since we have testimonial beliefs, testimony must be predominantly true. The above argument, however, is not quite in line with Reid's standpoint. It can explain why we tend to believe testimony, but it is an *a posteriori* justification. It

corresponds to Hume's argumentation from his famous passage about the testimony in *Of miracles*[9], but what anti-reductionists like Reid really aim at is to demonstrate that testimony is justified *a priori*.

According to Reid, our reliance on testimony is as basic and fundamental as our reliance on perception. Due to our human constitution, we tend to accept the testimony of others as naturally, directly and readily as the testimony of our senses or memory. To the extent that we can have access to *direct knowledge* when, in normal daylight, we see a cup on the table in front of us, so can we *know directly* that there is a cup on the table in the next room if we are told so by a normally sighted, non-malicious and sincere person who is in that room. In order to have a justified belief that there is a cup on the table in front of me, it is enough that my visual system *is* working properly and the physical circumstances *are* normal (proper lighting, *etc.*). But, importantly, I do not have to check all this before I am entitled to claim that I *know* that there is a cup in front of me.[10] In the same way, I have a right to say that I know directly that there is a cup on the table in the next room on the basis of someone's telling me so – without prior checking the reliability of my informant, the circumstances of her testimonial act, whether she might have a reason for lying, etc. It is enough if the circumstances of testimony are normal.

To recapitulate the main points, according to Reid, our reliance on testimony is not only justified, but it is basic in the sense that it does not require any further justification drawn from other sources of knowledge, like perception, memory or inference. The fact that testimony-based belief is sometimes supported, even remarkably so, by other epistemic capacities, like memory or inference, does not weaken the point that testimonial belief is justified directly, by testimony itself, and thus it is epistemically basic. Reid assigns the operation of the veracity and credulity principles not to

[9] "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. ... The reason, why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connection, which we perceive *a priori*, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them" (Hume, *Of Miracles*, 1999 [1748]: 74-75).

[10] The above account is woven into Reid's larger epistemic framework of his philosophy of *Common Sense*, where veracity of perception by senses and reliability of memory belong to the 'first principles' which do not require any support but are self-evident justified beliefs (cf. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, VI. v). Reid's epistemic realism and his 'first principles' do not require any justification; it would be a vain attempt to try to justify them, Reid's argument has it, since any justification takes these principles for granted; cf. the discussion of Reid's *Common Sense* principles in Wolterstorff (2004).

their sheer usefulness in our everyday practice, but to our natural human constitution; they cannot work differently from the way they work.

One could ask whether, indeed, we are under the influence of the two principles and the above account corresponds to the way we actually form our testimonial beliefs. Undoubtedly, small children tend to believe and accept rather uncritically what they are told. In the mental development of children, the capacities of doubt and disbelief are acquired much later and are deemed more complex than acceptance and trust, which are ontogenetically prior. As Reid's argument has it, if credulity were not a gift of nature and were not primary in humans, but were developed by children on a par with reasoning and other mental capacities, the attitude of trust should be greater in adolescents and adults than it is in children. Very young children should reveal the most neutral attitude to what they are told compared to other age groups. Since it is exactly the opposite; i.e., credulity is strongest in young children and is lessened with age and experience, then it follows that trust must be the natural endowment of human beings.[11] Let us note here that Reid's argument is congruent with some facts from language acquisition; namely, that the ability to deny a proposition is developed later compared to the ability to form affirmatives in a child's language.

Setting aside the arguments from developmental psychology, is the attitude of prevailing trust and acceptance of what others say still to be found in adults? In other words, do we initially accept others' testimony and our critical assessment thereof is switched on only subsequently (if at all), or, alternatively, is our initial attitude to others' testimony just neutral and we accept the testimonial content only having assessed it positively on some evidence?

The above question is connected with a broader issue of how we form our beliefs in general. How does the mind come to believe? Is the attitude of acceptance prior – if only for short – to critical assessment? (That later assessment may yield negative results leading to rejection or it may confirm the initial acceptance.) Or, alternatively, is our initial attitude to the belief's propositional content neutral and acceptance comes only with the positive assessment thereof? Descartes would say that the latter model is not only how we ought to but it is how we actually form our beliefs – we must understand their propositional content first, then consider the evidence for and against, however rapidly this might proceed, and if the judgment is favorable, we accept them as *our* beliefs. Many of us would probably regard this procedure

[11] See Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, chapter VI. xxiv: 197.

as logical and obvious.[12] However, the picture provided by the psychology of belief formation is less clear in that respect and provides serious arguments for the former, let us call it 'acceptance-first' view. In a series of articles on cognitive psychology and the problem of how the mental systems believe, Daniel T. Gilbert and his colleagues[13] argue that, contrary to the widely accepted Cartesian model of belief formation, the comprehension of belief content is not separable from and prior to the assessment thereof. All beliefs (i.e., their propositional contents) are initially accepted by the mind as true, simultaneously with comprehension, and only later some of them are provided with a 'negative tag' and rejected.[14] Disbelief (negative assessment) is therefore always psychologically secondary; it is a revision of prior belief. The key point of this mechanism is that ideas which have been merely comprehended by the mind *are* beliefs; i.e., they are represented in the mind in the same way as beliefs which have been rationally assessed as true. If testimonial beliefs are not exempt from this general rule – and there is no reason to think they are – then our comprehension of the content of testimony is simultaneous with our acceptance thereof, as Reid's 'credulity principle' would predict. Therefore, rational assessment of testimonial beliefs (if accomplished) is only secondary to the primary attitude of acceptance.

Arguments supporting the 'acceptance-first' model of belief formation have been provided by psychological experiments with adults placed in the conditions of 'depleted resources' (Gilbert 1991: 111-116). Typically, in such experiments, a person is required to perform simultaneously two or more resources-consuming tasks and at the same time is exposed to propositions which she would normally disbelieve, given normal conditions. The assumption is that, if overloaded with different tasks, the person will devote a smaller portion of her processing capacities to each of the tasks (hence: 'depleted resources') – also to the assessment of the truth value of

[12] See Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* on the workings of *passive* (automatic) and *active* (controlled) domains of the mind, involved, respectively, in the comprehension and assessment of ideas (1984 [1641]: 39).

[13] Gilbert (1991); Gilbert (1993); Glibert, Krull, Malone (1990); Gilbert, Tafarodi, Malone (1993); see also Lechniak (2011: 73-115).

[14] As pointed out by Gilbert (1991: 108), Baruch Spinoza was the first thinker to question the Cartesian divide into passive (comprehension) and active (assessment) powers of the mind; therefore, the first of the above-mentioned models of belief-formation could be called Spinozan. Spinoza claims that to understand a proposition, we have to implicitly accept it and only later can the proposition be rejected if we realize that it is incompatible with some other beliefs we hold (*Ethics,* Part 2, 49). In his view, ideas and beliefs are not different in kind because *all ideas are beliefs*.

the propositions in question. In consequence, the belief-formation process will end prematurely. If humans were Cartesian systems, that premature truncation of information processing would leave the person without any attitude, positive or negative, to the propositions she has been exposed to; the person would merely comprehend them. However, such experiments show that in the conditions of depleted resources and premature outputs, our ability to reject doubtful propositions is reduced and credulity increases. When faced with shortage of time, stress, disrupting tasks, etc., the subjects of such experiments typically do not suspend their judgment, nor do they show a balanced account of acceptance and rejection. Instead, they tend to believe propositions they have no reasons to believe, which strongly suggests that the 'acceptance-first' thesis is correct and this is the way we form beliefs.

Our prevailing attitude of acceptance is also confirmed by our usual practice of using affirmative terms; for example, in questions which are meant to be neutral, and to which the answer can be positive or negative. When asking about someone's feelings about *p*, we would normally say: *are you happy about it?* or *do you like it?*, not: *are you unhappy about it?* or *do you dislike it?* The latter two clearly suggest that we suppose the person may have a good reason to be unhappy and to dislike whatever it is that we asked about. In the present paper, we have often raised the question of whether beliefs based on testimony itself are epistemically *justified*, not whether they are epistemically *unjustified*. Similarly, in epistemological discourse we normally speak about justification of *belief*, not about justification of *disbelief*. It is the affirmative term that is used to express a neutral meaning (which is no longer so 'neutral'), not the negative term.

In conclusion, there are some good arguments to accept Reid's credulity principle; acceptance cannot be treated on a par with rejection as two possible results of truth-neutral comprehension and assessment of a proposition. Acceptance is psychologically prior to assessment and possible rejection. Whatever the evolutionary basis of this mechanism of belief formation may be, and its cognitive advantages or disadvantages, we naturally and involuntarily tend to *believe*.

However, a responsible epistemic agent could still argue that this initial acceptance does not have to be the end of the story of how we come to believe; rational assessment is still a viable option and a wise human being can be expected to make an epistemic effort and reject, or 'unaccept', those beliefs which are doubtful. The credulity principle as part of our mental make-up may influence and, at least partly, explain the way we form most of our testimonial beliefs, but the question of whether following this natural

propensity can make those beliefs *epistemically* justified is still open.[15] The foregoing arguments concern the psychology of our beliefs, whereas the above question is epistemological and *normative* in nature.

Let us consider the problem of whether there are any truly convincing *epistemological* arguments that anti-reductionist might appeal to when defending Reid's stance. It says, let us remember, that testimony in itself is a source of justification, and therefore, testimonial beliefs do not require any further justification from inference, memory or perception. They are justified analogically to perceptual beliefs or beliefs based on memory; to believe on others' word is our natural epistemic capacity, like to perceive. That view is grounded in Reid's philosophy of *Common Sense* and what he called the 'first principles' of human cognition. But, of course, one could argue that the differences between perception and testimony are too obvious and profound to treat these two on a par. Truthfulness and trust may be natural and predominant dispositions in humans, but we are often deceived or misinformed by our interlocutors, whereas perception is in that respect far more reliable.

However, to defend direct justification of testimonial beliefs one does not have to relate them to perceptual beliefs, which is bound to raise some doubts. A strategy worth considering is grounding justification of testimonial beliefs in what Reid called 'the social operations of mind'.[16] As explained by Reid in his *Essays*, operations of mind can be 'solitary' or 'social'. The former include acts of perception through different senses, remembering, reasoning, forming judgments, etc. To perform these acts we do not need other people; in contrast to performing social operations, which presuppose 'intercourse with some other intelligent being'[17], as it is the case when we enter a contract, make a promise, command, ask questions or testify. Importantly, such social operations of mind (our reliance on testimony included) are not reducible to solitary operations. They are as basic as the latter since they are grounded in our human constitution; we are who we are thanks to this social dimension of our nature, and what we believe is constitutively dependent on the epistemic community we live in. McMyler (2011: 37-44) argues that referring to the irreducibly social nature of testimonial beliefs and to the concept of trust in authority is a far better way of accounting for the justification of such beliefs

[15] Some epistemologists consider thus formulated question impossible to answer, stressing that we should focus on discovering how our beliefs *are* actually formed, not on how they *should* be formed; see the project of 'naturalized epistemology' (Quine 1969; see also Kornblith 1999).

[16] Cf. Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, V, vi-vii; see also Coady (2004: 183-186).

[17] Cf. Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, V, vi: 664.

than drawing analogies between testimony and perception. Thus, he returns to the above-mentioned medieval tradition, in which deference to someone's expertise and their authority constituted a legitimate reason for holding belief (see part II on the divide between authority-based *faith* and reason-based *knowledge*). What provides justification for testimony-based belief is the *authority* of the person who testifies; in that sense our testimonial beliefs are different in nature from inferential or perceptual beliefs, which are not mediated and warranted by another speaker.

Connected with the above 'second-personal' account of what justifies testimonial belief is the so-called 'assurance view' propounded by Richard Moran (2006). Also in Moran's approach, the speaker's assertion that *p* does not in itself provide justification for the hearer to believe that *p* (as in traditional anti-reductionism). What gives justification is the speaker's standing behind her word; the speaker by the act of asserting that *p* directed to the hearer gives the latter her assurance and takes responsibility for the truth of her assertion.

> On the assurance view, dependence on someone's freely assuming responsibility for the truth of P, presenting himself as a kind of guarantor, provides me with a characteristic reason to believe, different in kind from anything provided by evidence alone. (Moran 2006: 279)

According to McMyler and Moran, what is distinctive about the act of testimony and sets it apart from other kinds of assertion is the existence of that special bond of trust and responsibility between the audience and the testifier. This bond allows the audience to defer responsibility for meeting epistemic challenges back to the original testifier. Should a third person ask the audience how the relevant belief can be supported, the latter is entitled to cite the authority: '*X* told me so'.

That mutual bond has some consequences for discriminating the types of assertion that may give rise to testimonial beliefs. For example, a person who overhears that *p* in someone else's conversation, or learns that *p* from an uncooperative witness by forced interrogation cannot claim to be entitled to know that *p* from testimony, and cannot hold the speaker responsible for her words. If the speaker does not freely and consciously address her assertion to the hearer, there is no moral bond between the two persons, and the speaker confers no epistemic value on her words that the hearer might use as justification for the belief thus acquired.

Also, belief acquired on the basis of the speaker's *arguing* that *p* will not constitute testimonial belief. If we accept the speaker's argument that *p* as sound and convincing, having considered some reasons for and against it, then we ourselves are responsible for the belief's justification because we

have come to our own conclusions that *p*. In that case, our belief is not based on the speaker's authority but on our reasoning; therefore, it is inferential, not testimonial, in nature. In real-life circumstances, these two sources of belief, testimony and inference, often merge and it is difficult to assess their relative share in justification, but the more we have to rely on trust in the speaker's sincerity and competence rather than our reasoning concerning *p*, the more testimonial is the justification of our belief.

Of course, if knowing by testimony involves ceding (at least partial) responsibility for the justification of testimonial belief onto the testifier (cf. McMyler 2011: 61-76; Moran 2006: 278-281), then we are not autonomous epistemic agents in Locke's or Hume's understanding of epistemic autonomy. However, if we consider how little a true epistemic autonome would *know* and how cognitively deprived she would be, perhaps the ideal of an autonomous knower, who does not allow herself to depend on others and rejects any testimonial beliefs, is not worth pursuing.

However, in the aforementioned 'second-personal' or 'assurance' views, there remain some obvious doubts concerning the somewhat flawed connection between the belief's justification and the believer's epistemic responsibility. To what extent is the addressee of testimony responsible for the justification of her testimonial belief? Or, in other words, one could ask how deference to authority is to be distinguished from mere gullibility. At this point, we come across some inconsistency, or tension, which is present in both McMyler's 'second-personal' view (2011), in Reid's explanation of the workings of the credulity principle, and also in other anti-reductionist accounts.

Anti-reductionists of all strands generally agree that when accepting testimony, it is the audience's role to assess the testifier's competence and sincerity, even if that assessment amounts to an unreflective recognition that the standard signs of deceit or incompetence are not present. As the audience we are entitled to defer to someone's authority regarding the *content* of the testimony, but the decision of *whom* to trust (or not) is still our responsibility. This is a problem for anti-reductionism; since we must come to our own conclusions about the testifier's trustworthiness, we cannot claim that authority-based testimonial belief is not in any significant way based on inferential reasoning. It is just the opposite, our testimony-based belief that *p* is justified by our inferential belief in the authority of the testifier. In this way we have returned to the reductionist position.

To conclude, even if the anti-reductionist justification of testimony is grounded in the authority of the *person*, not the probability of the *event* testified to (Hume) or the *speech act* of testimony (Reid), the testifier's authority by itself cannot provide *non-inferential* justification, because that

very authority has to be assessed through inference, or, more probably, through a chain of inferences. If an anti-reductionist cannot take someone's authority as a justifier without compromising direct, non-inferential nature of testimony's justification, and if she is not ready to adopt the Reidian view that testimony gives *a priori* justified beliefs like perception does, then her position is difficult to defend. The problem is that the most appealing anti-reductionist arguments are not those showing how testimonial beliefs could be properly foundational for our knowledge, but the arguments exposing the difficulties involved in the reductionist position.

Perhaps the most convincing anti-reductionist argument against reductionism is that seeking justification for all testimony-based beliefs that we hold is not only impracticable but simply impossible, given the vast extent to which we depend on testimony. We cannot be blameworthy for accepting someone's assertion as *prima facie* true without checking the speaker's credibility if we are generally not able to seriously verify the speaker's trustworthiness and competence in a normal conversational exchange of information. That does not imply that evidence concerning the speaker's credibility is always inaccessible. In many cases it may be available, but in normal circumstances, with limited resources and time, it cannot be searched into. As argued by Henry H. Price in *Belief*, our primary concern as responsible human beings is search for knowledge and finding answers to the innumerable questions we desire to have answers to. Since the resources we have are inadequate to gain firsthand observation-based knowledge, we have to rely on testimony. If we did not accept what others tell us, we would have to 'suspend judgment, unable to find any answer at all' (Price 1969: 125).

However, the above commonsensical claim that we do *know* many things which we learned through testimony rests on the assumption that an *act of testimony* by itself or the *authority* of the testifier can provide justification of testimonial beliefs. This assumption, however, is less appealing to common sense than the reductionist claim that we must have *evidence* supporting the credibility of testimony to be justified in believing it. It is somewhat paradoxical that Hume's reductionism and Locke's evidentialism appear to be, at least *prima facie*, more convincing and commonsensical than Reid's stance, although it is the latter that allows for our *knowing* the multitude of things we usually claim to know from testimony.

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The Epistemic Justification of Testimony-Based Beliefs: between Knowledge and Faith

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the epistemological status of testimony; whether true beliefs based on the word of others deserve the name of knowledge and whether our reliance on testimony can be a justified epistemic strategy. If we assume that it is so and testimony-based beliefs can be epistemically justified, then the question arises of what it is that confers justification on such beliefs. On the basis of what other people say we may form true or false beliefs, so dependence on testimony in general is not an infallible strategy to form beliefs. Hence, according to many philosophers representing traditional Cartesian-style epistemological individualism, testimony-based beliefs are not *epistemically* justified, and, therefore, they do not make *knowledge*. According to other philosophers, especially in more recent Anglo-American epistemology, that inherent lack of certainty in testimony can be overcome, and testimony-based beliefs can be regarded as justified, and, if true, they will constitute knowledge, which can be furthered transferred, via testimony, to other people.

Keywords: testimony, belief, justification, knowledge, reductionism, anti-reductionism, Reid.