
TESTIMONY, TRUST, & AUTHORITY



BENJAMIN McMYLER

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Benjamin McMyler

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In my second year of graduate school at the University of Chicago, Richard Moran delivered a talk to the Department of Philosophy concerning the way in which knowledge is acquired from human testimony. The thesis of Moran's talk, later published under the title "Getting Told and Being Believed" (2005), was that the kind of reason for belief provided by a speaker's testimony—by her telling someone that such and such is the case—is categorically different from the kind of reason for belief provided by evidence. So stated, this claim struck me as puzzling. Surely a speaker's telling me that it is raining outside or that city bus fares have increased provides me with more or less adequate evidence that these things are the case. Nevertheless, the general intuition motivating Moran's thesis seemed to me profoundly correct. Unlike a footprint in the snow or a bloody knife at the scene of a crime, the kind of reason for belief provided by another person's telling me that something is so derives in some essential respect from the person of the speaker. If I accept her testimony in the way in which it is intended, then I don't merely believe what it is that she says. Instead, I believe *her*. My relationship to the facts is mediated in some essential respect by my relationship to a person, and this is profoundly different from the way in which other kinds of ordinary evidence mediate our cognitive relationship to the world around us.

My attraction to this intuition was no doubt primed by my longstanding interest in the nature and significance of human sociality, but I saw in it potential for making some real progress. By this time, testimony had become an almost fashionable topic in contemporary epistemology, and so I launched myself into the rapidly expanding philosophical literature on the subject. Unfortunately, I quickly realized that, aside from the work of Moran and a few others, my interests in the topic were not being squarely addressed. The standard problems and debates concerning the epistemology of testimony were structured in such a way as to actually screen off the issues that seemed to me most important. I therefore decided to try to work through these issues for myself.

This book is the end product of that decision. The manuscript has been in the works for several years now, and its current form is indebted to the inspiration, criticism, and advice of a great many people. At the University of Chicago I would like to thank James Conant, David Finkelstein, Michael Kremer, Josef Stern, and participants of the Philosophy of Mind, Wittgenstein, and Contemporary Philosophy workshops. In 2008

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My indebtedness to Moran's work on testimony cannot be overestimated. Not only did his work spark my initial interest in this topic, it also continues to exert an influence over what I say in this book that far outstrips the few explicit references in the text. I argue for and develop my view rather differently than does Moran, and rather than clutter the text with constant score-keeping concerning the relationship between our respective views, I have limited myself to a very brief discussion in chapter 3 of the relevant differences. Unfortunately, this doesn't do justice to the extent to which I have benefited from Moran's work. I have also greatly benefited from the comments of several anonymous referees and, most recently, from extended discussions with Linda Zagzebski concerning this and related material. A version of chapter 2 was previously published as "Knowing at Second Hand" in *Inquiry*, vol. 50, no. 5 (2007): 511-540. It is reprinted here by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd., <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>). Thanks also to Peter Ohlin, Lucy Randall, and Natalie Johnson at Oxford University Press.

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INTRODUCTION

Why, if I accept what you say, on the basis of your saying it, do I respond by saying “I believe you,” not “I believe what you say”? I would like to say that the home of belief lies in my relation to others.

(Cavell 1979: 391)

In the narrowest terms, this book is about *the epistemology of testimony*, about the branch of the theory of knowledge concerned with how we acquire knowledge and justified belief from the say-so of other people. By all accounts, a great deal of what we know and believe is in fact acquired in this way. Most of what we know about history, science, and current events is acquired from the spoken and written word, from being told things by people we trust and treat as authorities on these matters. For many epistemologists, the sheer volume of knowledge and belief acquired from the word of others is enough to make the topic of testimony one of serious and legitimate epistemological concern. Given that so much of what we know is actually acquired in this way, our general epistemological theories about the nature of knowledge and justification ought to have something to say about the kind of knowledge and justification acquired from the word of others.

The project of this book, however, is to demonstrate that the topic of the epistemology of testimony is of much broader and deeper philosophical significance than that of a mere subject matter to which general epistemological theories should be applied. Suitably thought through, the epistemology of knowledge and belief based on testimony helps to reveal one of the ways in which the human mind is a constitutively social phenomenon, one of the ways in which being the kind of minded being that we

are involves participating in interpersonal, social relationships. In the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, interest in the role of sociality in the constitution of mind has been largely confined to issues having to do with representational content, with the ways in which a subject's social environment plays a role in determining the content of her representational mental states. This is not my concern in this book.¹ Instead, I am concerned with the way in which social relations play a *justificatory role* in the processes of belief formation and knowledge acquisition. I am interested in how knowledge and belief can be justified in virtue of relations of authority and responsibility between persons and with what this reveals about the nature of the human mind.

The thesis of this book is that the category of other persons plays a distinctive and irreducible role in cognition. What other people tell us plays a role in the processes of belief formation and knowledge acquisition that is fundamentally unlike—that cannot be reduced to or modeled on—the role played by other kinds of impersonal evidence. We bear relations of epistemic dependence to others that are irreducibly interpersonal in nature, relations that we do not bear to nonpersons, and these relations have a distinctive kind of significance for us. We could not give them up and still be the kind of minded beings that we are. Such epistemic dependence is thus an important feature of what it is to be a human being.

This is an extremely unorthodox philosophical thesis, but it is somewhat surprising that it is so. In presenting and discussing these issues with a variety of audiences, I have found that it often takes little effort to convince nonphilosophers (and even many philosophers who are not epistemologists) that there is something distinctive and *sui generis* about the way in which knowledge and justified belief is acquired from the testimony of others. Unlike knowledge based on other epistemic sources such as perception, memory, and inference, knowledge based on testimony involves “taking another’s word for things,” “taking things on the authority of another,” or “trusting another for the truth.” Indeed, philosophical discussions of the epistemology of testimony are themselves littered with references to trust and authority. For the vast majority of epistemologists, however, such terms are (and indeed must be) mere placeholders to be replaced in the end by epistemological concepts that are deemed vastly more palatable, concepts like that of inductive evidence or reliable causal belief-producing processes. The idea that there might be something *sui generis* about the epistemology of testimony having to do with the way in which it is connected to the notions of trust and authority is thus roundly dismissed as not only false but verging on the nonsensical. We have a pretty clear idea of what concepts are ultimately epistemologically palatable, so the thought goes, and concepts like trust and authority are

¹ Goldberg (2007) uses social externalist (or anti-individualist) considerations concerning representational content to argue for anti-individualist conclusions concerning the epistemology of testimony.

not among them. They may be useful in getting a relevant epistemological phenomenon on the table, but in the end they must surely be replaced by something more familiar.

In this way, dominant ideas about the general nature of knowledge and justification have had a powerful influence on the way in which philosophers have thought about the epistemology of testimony. Accounts of the epistemology of testimony have generally been held subservient to more general accounts of the nature of knowledge and justification. There is nothing wrong with this in principle. The problem is simply that this has resulted in mistaken accounts of the epistemology of testimony. In this book I argue that the dominant theories of the epistemology of testimony have significant difficulty accounting for the relevant epistemic phenomena concerning the way in which knowledge and justified belief is acquired from the testimony of others. In essence, this is because the relevant epistemic phenomena—for example, the way in which an audience is entitled to defer epistemic challenges to its beliefs based on testimony—don't fit squarely into standard epistemological categories. I articulate and defend an alternative theory that does a much better job of accounting for the relevant phenomena, but this alternative account does so only by construing testimony as a genuinely *sui generis* epistemic source. Testimony is a *sui generis* epistemic source in that explaining the epistemology of testimony requires appealing to concepts and principles unique to testimony. The account that I offer thus makes an irreducible appeal to notions of trust and authority. On the account developed here, the epistemology of testimony is extremely unorthodox, but this is precisely why it is important and interesting. It is important and interesting because it forces us to rethink the kinds of considerations that are relevant to the acquisition of knowledge and justified belief.

I have tried in this book to focus as much as possible on the actual phenomenon of testimonial knowledge and belief itself, leaving to one side broader epistemological questions concerning the general nature of knowledge and justification. I am here concerned with giving the best possible explanation of our ordinary epistemic practices with respect to the acquisition and dissemination of testimonial knowledge and belief, leaving to one side the question of how all of this fits into more general epistemological theorizing. There is thus a sense in which I am here more concerned with testimony than I am with epistemology. Nevertheless, over the course of this book I hope to demonstrate that such unorthodox notions as trust and authority are deserving of serious epistemological treatment. Even though references to trust and authority are quite common in epistemological discussions of testimony, epistemologists seldom pay serious attention to the extant philosophical literatures concerning these concepts.² These concepts have been of sustained interest to moral, social, and

² Notable exceptions include Faulkner (2007a) and (2007b), Keren (2007), and Zagzebski (manuscript).

political philosophers, and it is a virtue of the account of testimony presented in this book that it shows how the epistemology of testimony connects to these broader philosophical issues. At the very least, I hope here to demonstrate that philosophers interested in the epistemology of testimony ought to pay serious attention to the nature of trust and authority.

In a sense, then, I aim here to rehabilitate the intuitive idea that testimonial knowledge and belief is distinctively based on “taking another’s word for things,” “taking things on another’s authority,” or “trusting another for the truth.” Beyond this, however, I want to provide a diagnosis as to why, from a philosophical point of view, this can seem so difficult to accept. I trace this difficulty to an idea that I call *epistemic autonomy*: the idea that fully rational cognitive agents are always solely epistemically responsible for the justification of their own beliefs. In chapter 1, I argue that an extremely important though largely unrecognized shift occurred in the Early Enlightenment period concerning philosophical conceptions of testimony and testimonial knowledge. Whereas prior to the Enlightenment testimonial knowledge or belief was often taken to be the result of a cognitive capacity distinctively connected to authority, figures like John Locke and David Hume began to portray testimony as a kind of ordinary inductive evidence, thereby severing the traditional connection between testimony and authority. This shift in the way in which testimony was conceived was a straightforward application to the epistemic realm of broader Enlightenment suspicions concerning the place of authority in political and religious affairs, but it is one that is seldom recognized. It amounts to a substantive claim about the nature of theoretical rationality, that fully rational cognitive agents are epistemically autonomous.

The standard contemporary theories concerning the epistemology of testimony are typically cashed out in such a way as to simply assume epistemic autonomy. The traditional debate about the epistemology of testimony is typically cast as a debate between *reductionism about testimony* and *anti-reductionism about testimony*. Reductionists about testimony model the epistemology of testimony on the epistemology of inductive inference. Reductionists hold that an audience’s testimonial belief is justified by the strength of an inference from a speaker’s testifying that *p*, through independently available considerations concerning the speaker’s trustworthiness, to the conclusion that *p*. Anti-reductionists about testimony reject the idea that testimonial justification is inferential and instead tend to model the epistemology of testimony on the epistemology of perception. Anti-reductionists typically hold that a speaker’s testimony that *p* provides an audience with a *prima facie* reason for believing that *p* analogous to the *prima facie* reason for belief provided by perceptual representation. Importantly, both knowledge based on inference and knowledge based on perception are forms of *firsthand knowledge*. Both inferring that *p* and perceiving that *p* involve a subject’s *coming to her own conclusion about things*. Intuitively,

however, knowledge and belief based on testimony does not involve a subject's coming to her own conclusion about things. Knowledge based on testimony is a form of *secondhand knowledge*, meaning it is knowledge that is epistemically mediated by the mind of a speaker in a way that knowledge based on ordinary inference or perception is not. Standard reductionist and anti-reductionist theories of testimony thus have difficulty making sense of the way in which testimonial knowledge is secondhand in virtue of being distinctively mediated by another mind.

In chapter 2, I provide an alternative, essentially interpersonal account of the epistemology of testimony that can make sense of the way in which testimonial knowledge is so mediated. This account does so, however, only by rejecting epistemic autonomy. According to the account of the epistemology of testimony developed here, learning from testimony is a fundamentally social epistemic capacity, a capacity the exercise of which is a cooperative undertaking between speaker and audience. This is demonstrated by the fact that, in acquiring knowledge and justified belief on the basis of testimony, an audience is entitled to *defer epistemic challenges* to her testimonial beliefs back to the original testifier. If an audience comes to believe that p on the basis of a speaker's testimony, and if a third-party challenges the audience's belief by producing evidence that tells against p , then the audience is entitled to defer the challenge back to the original speaker. The audience can fulfill her epistemic burden with respect to meeting the challenge by deferring to the testimonial speaker. This marks out testimonial belief as epistemologically distinctive. Only testimonial belief, belief justified by the authority of a speaker, admits of the deferral of challenges. And the fact that testimonial belief admits of deferral shows that testimonial believers are not solely epistemically responsible for the justification of their own beliefs. Epistemic autonomy is therefore mistaken.

Importantly, to reject epistemic autonomy is not to endorse gullibility or blind obedience to authority. We shouldn't trust just anyone about just anything, and hence we must be careful to assess the trustworthiness of purported theoretical authorities. Nevertheless, when we do judge that a speaker is trustworthy, and when we proceed to believe her testimony on this basis, we are not then epistemically autonomous. We are not then solely responsible for the justification of our testimonial belief, and this is shown by the fact that we are entitled to defer certain challenges to our testimonial belief back to the original testifier.

Unfortunately, giving up on epistemic autonomy might not seem like a viable option. Epistemic autonomy is such an entrenched assumption about the nature of theoretical rationality that it can be difficult to see what exactly it would mean to give it up. In the final three chapters I therefore work from a variety of directions to try to lessen its initial appeal. In chapter 3, I attempt to further articulate the interpersonal account of the epistemology of testimony developed in chapter 2 by placing this account in the

context of a developing debate concerning the epistemology of testimony that is decidedly different from the traditional debate between reductionism and anti-reductionism. This new debate concerns what we might call *epistemic dependence*, and placing my interpersonal account in the context of this new debate helps to highlight the way in which this account is important and distinctive. According to my interpersonal account, testimonial knowledge and belief is epistemically dependent on the metaphysical category of *other persons* (on *second persons*, in particular) and not merely on the *speech acts* or the *beliefs* of others. Testimonial knowledge and belief is epistemically dependent on the second-personal relations that we bear towards others—it involves *trusting a speaker for the truth*—and this makes it unlike any other form of knowledge and belief.

In chapters 4 and 5, I consider and respond to two very general reasons for thinking that this interpersonal account of the epistemology of testimony cannot be correct. The first involves the account's appeal to the attitude of trust. According to the interpersonal account of testimony developed in chapters 2 and 3, testimonial knowledge and belief distinctively involve trusting another person. However, one might think that interpersonal trust relations are a matter for ethics, not for epistemology.³ Such a thought is in fact encouraged by much philosophical thinking about the nature of trust. Philosophers often take the normative constraints on trust to be very different from the normative constraints on belief, and so they often hold that there is an inherent tension between trust and theoretical rationality. In chapter 4, I argue that this is not the case. The account of testimony developed in chapters 2 and 3 helps us to see that trust can itself be construed as a species of belief and so as fully consistent with theoretical rationality. Trust is nevertheless very different from other forms of belief in that it involves beliefs that are epistemically supported by a particular kind of reason, what I call a *second-personal reason*. This can explain much of what motivates philosophers to argue that trust is very different from ordinary belief, but it does so without having to claim that there is an inherent tension between trust and theoretical rationality.

Finally, in chapter 5, I examine the notion of a second-personal reason itself. One might object to the interpersonal account of testimony developed in chapters 2 and 3 and to the account of trust offered in chapter 4 by arguing, in effect, that there are no genuinely second-personal reasons for belief, that the relations of authority and responsibility between persons appealed to by my account of testimonial belief in particular and trust-based belief more generally are simply the wrong kind of thing to

³ Alternatively, one might think that to the extent that interpersonal trust is relevant to epistemology this is because interpersonal trust amounts to something like a bet made on the basis of the consideration of probabilities. I argue that this is mistaken as well.

play an irreducible role in epistemically justifying belief. Along these lines, one might accept that relations of authority and responsibility between persons can play a genuine role in practical rationality, that there can be genuinely second-personal reasons for action, but nevertheless deny that such relations play an analogous role in theoretical rationality. Something like this line of thought can be found in Stephen Darwall's recent work on the second person. Darwall (2006b) makes a compelling case for the existence of distinctively second-personal reasons for action, but in so doing he explicitly denies that there are any genuinely second-personal reasons for belief. In chapter 5, I argue that there is just as much reason to think that second-personal considerations play an irreducible role in theoretical rationality as there is to think that they play an irreducible role in practical rationality and that Darwall's reasons for thinking the contrary don't stand up to scrutiny. There is thus good reason to think that the rational significance of the second-person actually spans whatever divide there may be between theoretical and practical reason.

The upshot of this book is that human rationality is constitutively dependent on social relations, on relations of authority and responsibility that we bear towards others. Emphatically, this is not to give up on the significance of personal autonomy. Rather, it is to force a more nuanced appreciation of what such autonomy consists in for essentially social creatures like us. Genuine personal autonomy does not consist in our always being solely rationally responsible for the justification of our beliefs and actions. It does not involve our always coming to our own conclusion about what to think and do. The simple fact is that we do not always come to our own conclusion about what to think and do, and this is born out by our ordinary practice of deferring challenges to beliefs and actions justified by the directives of other persons in positions of theoretical and practical authority. Relations of trust and authority between persons thus play a fundamental and irreducible role in our lives as rational beings, and there is nothing lamentable or unfortunate about this. Even though epistemic autonomy is probably one of the most cherished ideals of the Enlightenment, it stands in the way of appreciating how genuinely autonomous cognitive agents are often, nevertheless, rationally dependent on social relations.

The issues broached in this book are deep and difficult, and I have done little more than scratch the surface of what ultimately ought to be said about them. I hope that what I say here proves at least somewhat illuminating and instructive, but most of all, I hope that it encourages others to do better.

1

TESTIMONY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

Here are a few things that I know. I know that the copperhead is the most common venomous snake in the greater Houston area. I know that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo. I know that, as I write, the average price for gasoline in the US is \$4.10 per gallon. And I know that my parents recently returned home from a trip to Canada.

All of these things I know on the basis of what epistemologists call *testimony*, on the basis of being told of them by another person or group of persons. I know that the copperhead is the most common venomous snake in the greater Houston area because I recently read this in a guide to Houston area snakes. I know that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo because at some point I learned about this in school. I know that the national average price for gasoline is \$4.10 per gallon because I just saw a report about it on the evening news. And I know that my parents recently returned home from their trip to Canada because I just talked to my mother on the phone.

As epistemologists use the term, ‘testimony’ refers to something much broader than what goes on in a court of law or a governmental hearing. None of the instances of testimonial knowledge listed above required a speaker to do anything like swear an oath, and if it turns out that one of the above speakers has lied, she cannot be brought up on charges of perjury. Additionally, the term ‘testimony’ refers to something narrower than mere statements or even, arguably, mere assertions. All of the instances of testimonial knowledge listed above were acquired from a speaker’s not only making a statement but making a statement explicitly intended to communicate information to