

TESTIMONY, EPISTEMOLOGY OF

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INTRODUCTION

Issues concerning the epistemology of testimony have become increasingly discussed in contemporary philosophy, with the debate widening out from epistemology to other fields such as philosophy of mind, action theory, and philosophy of language.

GENERAL OVERVIEWS

Adler (2006) and Green (2008) both offer excellent and in-depth introductions to the topic, with the added advantage that both of these articles are freely available on-line. For more involved overviews of the topic, in both cases written by a leading figure in the literature, see Fricker (2004) and Lackey (2010). The latter includes an extensive bibliography. See Lackey (2006*b*) for a sophisticated critical discussion of the recent literature on the epistemology of testimony which specifically focuses on two key issues: (i) whether testimonial knowledge can be acquired only by being transmitted from speaker to hearer, and (ii) whether a hearer must have positive reasons to justifiably accept a speaker's testimony. Finally, for a more concise overview of the field, see Lackey (2006*a*).

Adler, J. (2006). 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (ed.) E. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/testimony-episprob/>.

[An excellent overview of the literature on the epistemology of testimony. This article is freely available on-line].

Fricker, E. (2004). 'Testimony: Knowing Through Being Told', *Handbook of Epistemology*, (eds.) I. Niiniluoto, M. Sintonen & J. Wolenski, 109-30, Dordrecht: Kluwer.

[An in-depth survey of the literature on the epistemology of testimony, written by (and from the perspective of) one of the leading figures in this area].

Green, C. (2008). 'The Epistemology of Testimony', *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (eds.) B. Dowden & J. Fieser, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-testi.htm>.

[An excellent overview of the literature on the epistemology of testimony. This article is freely available on-line].

Lackey, J. (2006*a*). 'Introduction', *The Epistemology of Testimony*, (eds.) J. Lackey & E. Sosa, 1-21, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A neat and concise introduction to the field, written by one of the leading figures working in this area].

—— (2006b). ‘Knowing from Testimony’, *Philosophy Compass* 1, 432-48.

[A sophisticated critical discussion of the recent literature on the epistemology of testimony which specifically focuses on two key issues: (i) whether testimonial knowledge can be acquired only by being transmitted from speaker to hearer, and (ii) whether a hearer must have positive reasons to justifiedly accept a speaker’s testimony].

—— (2010). ‘Testimonial Knowledge’, *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, (eds.) S. Bernecker & D. H. Pritchard, New York: Routledge.

[An in-depth survey of the literature on the epistemology of testimony, written by (and from the perspective of) one of the leading figures in this area. Includes an extensive bibliography].

TEXTBOOKS

Given that work on the epistemology of testimony is—compared to many other central debates in epistemology—relatively young, there has not yet been published a textbook which is exclusively devoted to this topic. Perhaps the closest thing to a textbook on this topic is Welbourne (2001). While being a general introduction to epistemology, it approaches this more general topic largely through the lens of the epistemology of testimony. See also Audi (2003), which is a first-rate general epistemology textbook which also includes a lengthy chapter on testimony. Seminal texts in the area, such as Coady (1992), could also serve as suitable textbooks for a more advanced audience, as could recent important monographs on testimony like Goldberg (2007) or Lackey (2008), though obviously books of this sort will offer a partisan line. Coady (1992) has the advantage of covering a wide range of topics, such as the relevance of the epistemology of testimony to such areas as history, law, mathematics and psychology. Goldberg (2007) has the advantage that it covers a range of relevant literature in the philosophy of language and mind. Lackey (2008) is exclusively focused on the epistemology of testimony and so has the virtue of being a very in-depth discussion of this topic.

Audi, R. (2003). *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, London: Routledge.

[Although not exclusively focussed on testimony, this advanced epistemology textbook is one of the best available and it contains a lengthy chapter devoted to testimony].

Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A seminal and extremely influential treatment of the topic. Coady argues for an anti-reductionist thesis and applies his view to such fields as history, law, mathematics and psychology].

Goldberg, S. (2007). *Anti-Individualism: Mind and Language, Knowledge and Justification*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[Offers a distinctive take on the epistemology of testimony, which draws on recent movements in the philosophy of language and mind].

Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A sophisticated and in-depth discussion of the epistemology of testimony from one of the leading figures working on this topic].

Welbourne, M. (2001). *Knowledge*, Durham: Acumen Press.

[Although a general textbook in epistemology, this text approaches the topic from the angle of the epistemology of testimony].

ANTHOLOGIES

The most important and widely-read anthology is Lackey & Sosa (2006) which includes new contributions from a number of the leading writers on testimony, including (among others) Elizabeth Fricker, Peter Graham, C. A. J. Coady, Robert Audi and Sanford Goldberg. There are also two recent journal special issues available which collect some important new work on this topic. Lackey (2007) includes contributions from Jonathan Adler, Albert Casullo, Paul Faulkner, John Greco, Peter Lipton, Patrick Rysiew and Linda Zagzebski, amongst others. O'Brien (2008) includes contributions from Elizabeth Fricker, Sanford Goldberg and Robert Audi, amongst others.

Lackey, J., & Sosa, E. (eds.) (2006). *The Epistemology of Testimony*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[An anthology of new papers on the topic, including contributions from Robert Audi, C. A. J. Coady, Elizabeth Fricker, Richard Fumerton, Sanford Goldberg, Peter Graham, Jennifer Lackey, Keith Lehrer, Richard Moran, Frederick F. Schmitt, Ernest Sosa and James Van Cleve].

Lackey, J. (ed.) (2007). *Episteme* (special issue on *The Epistemology of Testimony*) 4.

[An anthology of new papers on the topic, including contributions from Jonathan Adler, Albert Casullo, Paul Faulkner, John Greco, Arnon Keren, Melissa Koenig & Paul Harris, Peter Lipton, Marc Moffett, Patrick Rysiew and Linda Zagzebski].

O'Brien, D. (ed.) (2008). *Philosophica* (special issue on *The Epistemology of Testimony*) 78.

[An anthology of new papers on the topic, including contributions from Robert Audi, Elizabeth Fricker, Sanford Goldberg, Peter Graham, Dan O'Brien and Duncan Pritchard].

THE NATURE OF TESTIMONY

Substantive debates in the epistemology of testimony presuppose certain commitments as regards the very *nature* of testimony. On this score, there is—unsurprisingly—a divide with respect to just how narrowly or widely testimony should be conceived. Coady (1992) prominently defends a narrow account whereby (among other conditions) testimony must be offered (by the testifier) as evidence, and actually be good evidence for the target proposition, and directed toward a person (or persons) seeking to settle some disputed question. On the other side of the spectrum, Fricker (1995) defends a *wide* account of the nature of testimony, according to which any 'expression of thought' qualifies as testimony. Graham (1997) notably holds a more moderate position here, more restrictive than the wide view, but less narrow than Coady's. Lackey (2006) offers a helpful critique of these positions and argues herself for a *disjunctive* account of the nature of testimony—one sensitive to a distinction between subject testimony and hearer testimony.

Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Offers a very restrictive account of the nature of testimony, such that (roughly) testimony must be offered (by the testifier) as evidence, and directed toward a person (or persons) seeking to settle some disputed question].

Fricker, E. (1995). 'Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony', *Mind* 104, 393-411.

[Offers a very inclusive conception of testimony, such that any expression of thought qualifies as testimony].

Graham, P. (1997). 'What is Testimony?', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47, 227-32.

[A subtle discussion of the nature of testimony, which treads an intermediate path between the views put forward by Coady (1992) and Fricker (1995)].

Lackey, J. (2006). 'The Nature of Testimony', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87, 177-97.

[A sophisticated discussion of the nature of testimony which offers a new 'disjunctive' account of testimony].

TRANSMISSION

Is it a *belief* with certain epistemic properties, or perhaps something else (i.e., information, communicative content, etc.), that we should think of as being *transmitted* from informant to recipient in testimonial exchanges? Additionally, must the informant actually *know* that to which he testifies in order for the hearer to gain knowledge through (that piece of) testimony? These broad questions shape the terrain within which knowledge (/justification/warrant) transmission is debated in the epistemology of testimony. Regarding the first question, Welbourne (1979), Coady (1992), Burge (1993) and Fricker (1995) are among those who insist that testimonial exchange concerns *belief*. As for the second question, there are, as Lackey (2010) points out, two distinct points regarding which there is important disagreement. Putting these points quite broadly, the first concerns whether it is *necessary* that, in order for a hearer to learn that *p* on the basis of some informant's testimony that *p*, the informant must know *p*. Secondly, there is debate about whether it is *sufficient* for a hearer to gain knowledge from an informant that the informant know *p* and the hearer (in the absence of any undefeated defeaters) believe *p* on the basis of (that piece of) testimony. For key examples of support for the first thesis, see Welbourne (1979), McDowell (1994), Audi (1997) and Burge (1997). For key examples of support for the second thesis, see Welbourne (1979), Coady (1992), Adler (1994), McDowell (1994) and Audi (1997).

Adler, J. (1994). 'Testimony, Trust, Knowing', *The Journal of Philosophy* 91, 264-75

[Argues that it is sufficient (absent defeaters) for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge that the informant knows the target proposition].

Audi, R. (1997). 'The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, 405-22.

[Defends the thesis that it is both necessary and sufficient (absent defeaters) for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge that the informant knows the target proposition].

Burge, T. (1993). 'Content Preservation', *The Philosophical Review* 102, 457-88.

[A classic text in this regard, indeed in philosophy more generally, which offers support for the following claims: (i) that testimonial exchange concerns belief, and (ii) that it is both necessary and sufficient (absent defeaters) for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge that the informant knows the target proposition].

Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Argues that: (i) testimonial exchange concerns belief, and (ii) it is sufficient (absent defeaters) for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge that the informant knows the target proposition].

Fricker, E. (1995). 'Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony', *Mind* 104, 393-411.

[Argues that testimonial exchange concerns belief].

Lackey, J. (2010). 'Testimonial Knowledge', *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, (eds.)

- S. Bernecker & D. H. Pritchard, New York: Routledge.
[An in-depth survey of the literature on the epistemology of testimony, written by one of the leading figures in this area, which includes a helpful taxonomy of views regarding the topic of transmission. Also offers an extensive bibliography].
- McDowell, J. (1994). 'Knowledge by Hearsay', *Knowing from Words: Western and Indian Philosophical Analysis of Understanding and Testimony*, (eds.) B. K. Matilal & A. Chakrabarti, 195-224, Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer.
[Offers support for the thesis that it is both necessary and sufficient (absent defeaters) for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge that the informant knows the target proposition].
- Welbourne, M. (1979). 'The Transmission of Knowledge', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 29, 1-9.
[Offers support for the following claims: (i) that testimonial exchange concerns belief, and (ii) that it is both necessary and sufficient (absent defeaters) for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge that the informant knows the target proposition].

REDUCTIONISM

The debate between reductionism and non-reductionism is probably the most significant debate in the epistemology of testimony. As Lackey (2010) has noted, the two most fundamental questions framing this dispute are: (i) must one have additional (non-testimonially dependent) reasons for accepting some item of testimony in order to possess testimonial knowledge?; and (ii) is testimony, *qua* a potential *source* of human knowledge, simply reducible to more basic sources such as perception, induction, memory (etc.)? *Reductionists* are distinguished from non-reductionist in virtue of answering 'yes' to these questions, whilst non-reductionists answer 'no'. For the key contemporary defences (or at least sympathetic treatments) of the position we've outlined as reductionism, see Lyons (1997), Lipton (1998), Lehrer (2006), Van Cleve (2006) and, especially, Fricker (1995).

- Fricker, E. (1995). 'Telling and Trusting: Reductionism and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony', *Mind* 104, 393-411.
[A classic and often cited defence of the reductionist view].
- Lackey, J. (2010). 'Testimonial Knowledge', *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, (eds.) S. Bernecker & D. H. Pritchard, New York: Routledge.
[An in-depth survey of the literature on the epistemology of testimony, written by one of the leading figures in this area, and which offers a useful discussion of the reductionism/non-reductionism distinction. Includes an extensive bibliography].
- Lehrer, K. (2006). 'Testimony and Trustworthiness', *The Epistemology of Testimony*, (eds.) J. Lackey & E. Sosa, 145-59, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[A key recent defence of reductionism which draws on the author's earlier work on trust].
- Lipton, P. (1998). 'The Epistemology of Testimony', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 29, 1-31.
[A key defence of reductionism which draws on a critical discussion of work on the epistemology of testimony by C. A. J. Coady and Steven Shapin].
- Lyons, J. (1997). 'Testimony, Induction and Folk Psychology', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75, 163-78.
[A key defence of reductionism which draws on the inductive support that agents can offer in support of their testimony-based beliefs].
- Van Cleve, J. (2006). 'Reid on the Credit of Human Testimony', *The Epistemology of Testimony*, (eds.) J. Lackey & E. Sosa, 50-74, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A paper sympathetic to reductionism which draws on a subtle discussion of Reid's writings on testimony, particularly with regard to the analogy that Reid draws between testimony and perception].

NON-REDUCTIONISM

By far the most popular view in the literature when it comes to the reductionism/non-reductionism distinction is non-reductionism. The classic text in this regard is Coady (1992), but for other key endorsements of non-reductionism, see Welbourne (1979), Audi (1997), Burge (1993), Foley (1994) and McDowell (1994).

Audi, R. (1997). 'The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, 405-22.

[An influential defence of non-reductionism which, like Coady (1992), emphasises the tremendous extent to which we are reliant on testimony which does not satisfy the reductionist rubric].

Burge, T. (1993). 'Content Preservation', *The Philosophical Review* 102, 457-88.

[A very influential paper which offers a famous defence of non-reductionism].

Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[The *locus classicus* for discussions of non-reductionism].

Foley, R. (1994). 'Egoism in Epistemology', *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*, (ed.) F. Schmitt, 53-73, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

[An important defence of non-reductionism which appeals to the idea that our epistemic activities essentially presuppose a rational self-trust and thus, by extension, a rational trust of others].

McDowell, J. (1994). 'Knowledge By Hearsay', *Knowing from Words: Western and Indian Philosophical Analysis of Understanding and Testimony*, (eds.) B. K. Matilal & A. Chakrabarti, 195-224, Dordrecht, Holland: Kluwer.

[Argues that just because there are undoubtedly cases where testimony is not to be trusted and thus where one should seek independent grounds before believing another's word, it does not follow, *contra* the reductionist, that one should regard testimonial knowledge in epistemically good conditions as requiring such independent support].

Welbourne, M. (1979). 'The Transmission of Knowledge', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 29, 1-9.

[An important early defence of non-reductionism which is still often cited today].

HYBRID AND REVISIONARY PROPOSALS

When a certain distinction becomes central to a field then inevitably one finds that a sub-debate emerges which concerns the status of the distinction itself, along with an associated literature on possible 'hybrid' views. This is no less true for the reductionism/non-reductionism distinction. For an influential critique of the reductionism/non-reductionism dichotomy, see Lackey (2006). For recent examples of moderate or hybrid views, see Faulkner (2000), Pritchard (2004), Goldberg (2006) and Lackey (2008). For a sophisticated exploration of the reductionism/non-reductionism distinction, which maps out a number of possible positions, see Graham (2006).

Faulkner, P. (2000). 'The Social Character of Testimonial Knowledge', *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, 581-601.

[Offers a critique of Burge's account of the epistemology of testimony as a means of highlighting a new way of thinking about this source of knowledge, with the aim of

providing an account of the epistemology of testimony which can answer to the key motivations behind reductionism and non-reductionism].

Goldberg, S. (2006). 'Reductionism and the Distinctiveness of Testimonial Knowledge', *The Epistemology of Testimony*, (eds.) J. Lackey & E. Sosa, 127-44, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Offers a moderate form of non-reductionism which can answer to some of the motivation behind the reductionist view by allowing that a very modest form of 'monitoring' of informants is required for the transmission of knowledge via testimony].

Graham, P. (2006). 'Liberal Fundamentalism and its Rivals', *The Epistemology of Testimony*, (eds.) J. Lackey & E. Sosa, 93-115, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A very useful paper which sets forth a detailed taxonomy of the kinds of positions that are available with regard to the epistemology of testimony].

Lackey, J. (2006). 'It Takes Two to Tango: Beyond Reductionism and Non-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony', *The Epistemology of Testimony*, (eds.) J. Lackey & E. Sosa, 160-89, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Offers a sophisticated critique of the reductionism/non-reductionism distinction as it is usually understood in the contemporary literature].

——— (2008). *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Offers an influential 'dualist' response to the reductionism/non-reductionism dispute].

Pritchard, D. H. (2004). 'The Epistemology of Testimony', *Philosophical Studies* 14, 326-48.

[Offers a hybrid proposal regarding the epistemology of testimony which draws heavily on recent work on the epistemic externalism/internalism distinction].

TESTIMONY AND ASSERTION

Testimonial exchange serves as a special connecting point between the debates concerning the transmission of epistemic properties and debates concerning the norms governing assertion. Of particular interest here is the connection between the idea that we can only gain testimonial knowledge from informants who themselves possess knowledge (of the relevant proposition) and the related thought—defended most prominently by Williamson (1996)—that knowledge is the norm governing proper assertion. For two key discussions in this regard, see Lackey (2007) and Goldberg (2009). For a more general discussion of how different models of assertion can have implications for the epistemology of testimony, see Owens (2006).

Goldberg, S. (2009). 'The Knowledge Account of Assertion and the Conditions on Testimonial Knowledge', *Williamson on Knowledge*, (eds.) P. Greenough & D. H. Pritchard, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A detailed exploration of the implications for the epistemology of testimony of Williamson's (1996) claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion].

Lackey, J. (2007). 'Norms of Assertion', *Noûs* 41, 594-626.

[A critique of Williamson (1996) which draws on relevant literature in the epistemology of testimony].

Owens, D. (2006). 'Testimony and Assertion', *Philosophical Studies* 130, 105-29.

[A helpful general discussion of the epistemological ramifications of different models of assertion].

Williamson, T. (1996). 'Knowing and Asserting', *The Philosophical Review* 105, 489-523.

[The classic contemporary defence of the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion].

VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

One emerging topic in the epistemology of testimony is the question of whether non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony is incompatible with virtue epistemology, which is a popular proposal in mainstream epistemology. If so, this is highly significant, since most virtue epistemologists are also non-reductionists. Lackey (2007) offers a clear statement of this problem. See Pritchard (2009) for a development of the problem. Riggs (2009) offers a response on behalf of the virtue epistemologist. For a clear statement of the kind of virtue-theoretic position under threat in light of this objection, see Greco (2002).

Greco, J. (2003). 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief', *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, (eds.) M. DePaul & L. Zagzebski, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[A clear example of the kind of virtue-theoretic account of knowledge that is under threat from the argument put forward by Lackey (2007)].

Lackey, J. (2007). 'Why We Don't Deserve Credit for Everything We Know', *Synthese* 158, 345-61.

[The key paper in which the objection that virtue epistemology is incompatible with non-reductionism is set-out].

Pritchard, D. H. (2009). 'Knowledge and Final Value', *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, A. Haddock, A. Millar & D. H. Pritchard, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Develops the objection first raised by Lackey (2007) regarding the incompatibility of virtue epistemology and non-reductionism].

Riggs, W. (2009). 'Two Problems of Easy Credit', *Synthese* 169, 201-16.

[Offers a defence on behalf of the virtue epistemologist to the kind of problem raised for their view by Lackey (2007)].