Introduction

This essay concerns the speech act of testimony, one of the most common acts we perform. When we tell a passing stranger the time, and when we tell our friends how our work is going, our speech communicates information that our hearers would not have but for that speech. Much of our knowledge is attained through testimony, spoken or written. For instance, we would know almost nothing about history if it were not for the accounts of witnesses and historians. This raises the question: What kind of reason do we have to believe what we are told?

Testimony is not only a source of knowledge, but also a voluntary act of the teller's. The teller can choose her words, and she can choose whether to tell the truth or to say what she believes to be false. As such, she can be held responsible for her testimony. She may have certain obligations that she should fulfill in her testimony, as she does in carrying out any other act.

This essay will give a unified treatment of the epistemology of testimony and of its normative structure. As we will see, a satisfactory account of the epistemology of testimony must allow for the fact that testimony is a voluntary act for which the teller assumes responsibility. Some of the norms on testimony, in turn, can be deduced from the epistemology of testimony. The teller assumes responsibility her testimony because she stakes her credibility on its truth. Testimony's dual nature, as a source of knowledge and as an act on which there are norms, is no accident; each of these aspects is necessary for the other.

1. The Epistemological Problem

The most obvious questions about testimony are epistemological. Given that we learn so much from other people, we might ask how it is that we can learn from the testimony of others. Are we ever justified in believing what someone tells us, just because she[1] has told us? If so, when, and how? These questions are important for the study of knowledge, and central to the study of testimony. Communicating knowledge and inducing beliefs are among the essential functions, if testimony has essential functions at all. The question is, when does testimony justify the hearer in believing what she is told, and how?

One strand of modern philosophy argues that we should not accept testimony, or at least that acceptance of testimony does not yield knowledge.[2] Another strand of philosophy holds that we are often justified in believing what we are told, but that justification arises from principles of justification that give no special status to testimony.[3] Still another view is that our reliance on testimony is justified, and that this justification is specific to testimony and cannot be reduced to non-testimonial forms of justification.[4]

This essay argues that there is a special kind of justification for our reliance on testimony that is irreducible to non-testimonial forms of justification, but that this

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[1] I will generally refer to persons of unspecified gender with feminine pronouns.

[2] For instance, Locke: "The floating of other Mens 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 Opiniatrety, 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" (Locke 1700, I.iv.23, p.101).

[3] Hume, for instance, has such a view of testimony. We discuss Hume's view further in Chapter II.

[4] C.A.J. Coady claims that Reid is the only (pre-20th century) philosopher to have held such a view, which he calls "the fundamentalist response"; the views ascribed to Locke and Hume Coady calls "the puritan response" and "the reductive response," respectively (Coady 1992, pp. 21-3). Since the late 20th century more philosophers have adopted some form of the fundamentalist response, including Tyler Burge (1993), Angus Ross (1986), Richard Moran (1999), and to some extent Coady himself, all of whose views are discussed in the text (Burge and Coady in Chapter II, Ross and Moran in Chapter III and the following).

justification is severely limited. To understand this justification and its limits, we must

distinguish between two ways in which reliance on testimony could be reduced to other

forms of justification. The first way is what Elizabeth Fricker calls a "global reduction"

(Fricker 1994, 1995), in which the belief that testimony is generally reliable is justified

without relying on any testimony whatsoever. The second way is what Fricker calls a

"local reduction," in which the belief that a particular piece of testimony is trustworthy is

justified without relying on that particular piece of testimony.[5] Depending on whether we

require a global reduction of testimony or only a local reduction of each particular piece

of testimony, there are two different theses about the evidence we need in order to be

justified in relying on testimony. Requiring a global reduction yields what I call General

Evidentialism:

> (General Evidentialism) A person is justified in believing the single claim
> that most testimony is true only insofar as she has evidence for that claim.[6]

Requiring a local reduction yields what I call Particular Evidentialism:

> (Particular Evidentialism) Being told that p on a particular occasion only
> justifies a person in believing that p insofar as it gives her evidence that p.

If a hearer is told that p, Particular Evidentialism allows that she is justified in believing

that p so long as she has evidence that the particular piece of testimony is reliable, which

will in turn give her evidence for p. The only proviso is that the evidence for the

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[5] Note that, when someone is told that p, a local reduction usually will not be a justification for belief that p that ignores that particular act of testimony. Rather, the hearer will justify the belief that that particular act of testimony is trustworthy, and then she will use the reliability of that testimony as a justification for belief that p.

[6] By insisting that the person gather evidence, General Evidentialism rules out a global reduction that relies on a non-evidential justification for believing testimony's reliability, where that non-evidential justification does not itself come from testimony. The existence of such a non-evidential justification, however, would entail that testimony had a special epistemological status, so General Evidentialism captures the idea that testimony has no special status.

reliability of the particular piece of testimony does not presuppose that that particular piece of testimony is reliable. It may rely on other testimony.[7]

We will argue for the limited claim for testimony's special epistemic status, that General Evidentialism is false but Particular Evidentialism is true.[8] Because General Evidentialism is false, the claim that most testimony is true can justify our reliance on testimony, even if we have no non-testimonial evidence for that claim itself. It is not necessary to find a completely non-testimonial justification for believing what we are told. Thus testimony has a special epistemological status, in that there is a default presumption that testimony is reliable; in investigating the epistemic significance of testimony we need not start with a blank slate. The truth of Particular Evidentialism, however, establishes the limits to testimony's special status. A particular piece of testimony does not supply its own special justification for believing what we are told. Rather, our justification for believing each particular thing that we are told must come from evidence, though the general reliability of testimony can form part of that evidence.

The epistemological project of this dissertation, then, will be to argue against General Evidentialism and for Particular Evidentialism. These arguments will take place in an anti-skeptical framework. We will take it that the world is not radically different than we generally suppose it to be, and that our theories need not take this possibility into account. So it is not our goal to prove that we are not brains in vats, nor that our world is not a carefully constructed stage set that is disassembled when we are not present. In fact

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[7] Analogously to General Evidentialism (see previous note), Particular Evidentialism excludes reductions that rely on a non-evidential justification for the reliability of the particular piece of testimony. As before, the idea that we have a non-evidential justification for believing in the reliability of particular pieces of testimony makes testimony deeply special epistemologically, so Particular Evidentialism captures the idea that particular pieces of testimony have no special epistemological status.

[8] This accords with Fricker's position of advocating local reductionism but not global reductionism.

we will take it as a constraint on our theories that they validate common sense, to the extent that we are justified in believing that we are not brains in vats and that our world is not a stage set. Of course we must not exclude the possibility of localized, if large-scale, errors, which may require the large-scale belief revisions that take place when someone discovers that the earth goes around the sun or that her government's past conduct has not been as honorable as she had previously thought. Nevertheless, any position that results in some sort of global skepticism will be rejected.

This rejection of skepticism means that our account of the epistemology of testimony will be constrained by the justifications that testimony must give us if we are to be justified in believing that the world is broadly the way it is (as we believe it to be). Any account that does not allow that testimony gives us these justifications will leave us unjustified in believing that the world is broadly the way it is, and will thus require some sort of global skepticism. This is not to say that the account of the epistemology of testimony must validate us in believing each and every piece of testimony we do believe. People often believe what they are told when they ought not to. It is, rather, to say that the account should not leave us without justification for believing some broad category of things on which there is consensus that we have attained knowledge; for instance, knowledge of history, or knowledge of places that the believer has never been, or knowledge of science, not to mention many more everyday beliefs whose justification depends on testimony.

Accordingly, the argument against General Evidentialism is that accepting it would make it impossible to justify beliefs gained from testimony on a wide range of subjects. It is impossible to gather evidence that testimony is true without presupposing the

reliability of testimony, as General Evidentialism requires if we are to be justified in believing that most testimony is true. Without being justified in believing that most testimony is true, we will not be justified in believing many of the things we are told, so that our beliefs about (for instance) history and distant lands will be unjustified. General Evidentialism leads to exactly the sort of skepticism that we are rejecting.

Global considerations concerning skepticism will be sufficient for the rejection of General Evidentialism. The defense of Particular Evidentialism will take place on different terrain. To see why Particular Evidentialism is true, we will have to consider the teller's responsibility for her testimony.

2. Epistemology and Norm

The normative questions about testimony are less obviously relevant to the nature of testimony than the epistemological questions. Unlike a speech act such as contracting, testimony does not wear its norms on its sleeve. The act of contracting is meant to impose contractual obligations on the parties; any act not meant to impose obligations in this way would be radically different from contracting. By contrast, it is not immediately obvious how testimony imposes any particular kind of obligation on the teller or the hearer. Typically testimony is meant to be taken as a reason to believe, and an act that was not presented as a reason to believe would be radically different from testimony. But this function of testimony is epistemological, and does not make it obvious what norms apply to testimony.

Nevertheless, an account of the epistemology of testimony must not neglect the normative aspect of testimony. Particular acts of testimony provide evidence for all sorts

of things that do not depend on the fact that the teller is choosing to use language in a certain way and to attempt to communicate belief. When someone says something, for instance, it provides evidence that her vocal cords are in good working order. The hearer's justification for believing what she is told, however, is nothing like this kind of evidence. When we believe what we are told, we depend on the teller's free choice to tell us a certain thing. Nothing but a person choosing freely can give us this kind of testimonial justification.

These considerations motivate Angus Ross (1986) and Richard Moran (1999) to reject Particular Evidentialism in favor of what Moran calls the Assurance View. On the Assurance View, particular pieces of testimony give the hearer a non-evidential justification for belief that is rooted the assurance that the teller offers of the truth of her testimony. The Assurance View holds that we cannot account for the responsibility a teller takes for her assurance unless particular pieces of testimony provide a non-evidential justification for what is told, and so we must posit this non-evidential testimonial justification.

Our argument for Particular Evidentialism, in contrast, is that the teller's assurance never gives the hearer justification for believing what she is told except when it gives her evidence for what is told. Accordingly, Particular Evidentialism is better than the Assurance View at predicting when we are justified in accepting testimony. Furthermore, we argue, treating particular testimony as evidence is compatible with seeing the teller as giving an assurance for which she takes responsibility. There is therefore no role for a non-evidential justification based in the teller's assurance; Particular Evidentialism allows us to give a satisfactory account of testimony.

We will not only argue that Particular Evidentialism is compatible with the teller's responsibility for her testimony; we will derive the teller's responsibility for her testimony from the epistemology of testimony. The derivation depends on A.R. Anderson's idea that obligation can be analyzed in terms of a sanction, such that the sanction applies if the obligation is not met (Anderson 1967). If testimony is typically meant to induce belief in the hearer, then it is a sanction on the teller when the hearer does not believe her; it means that the teller is being thwarted in what she is trying to do. I call not having your testimony believed the *reliability sanction*; seeing it as a sanction accords with Austin's claim that a hearer insults the teller in a special way when she does not believe what the teller says she knows (Austin 1946, p. 100). By Anderson's suggestion, the actions that merit the reliability sanction are the actions that the teller is obliged to avoid. A teller merits the reliability sanction when her hearers should not believe what she tells them. So the proposed connection between the epistemology of testimony and its normative structure is that the teller makes herself responsible for avoiding what will take away her hearers' reason to believe her testimony.

This approach yields an unsurprising answer as to what the teller makes herself responsible for: the truth of her testimony. The nature of this responsibility, however, may be more surprising. On our analysis, the teller makes herself responsible for the truth of her testimony because telling falsehoods will weaken future hearers' reason to believe her future testimony, and thus will mean that in the future she may merit the reliability sanction. This is not the moral responsibility to avoid a lie, or a personal

responsibility that the teller has to the hearer.[9] The responsibility that is enforced by the

reliability sanction can be derived from the epistemology of testimony alone. Even if

claims about morality and personal obligation were all nonsense, the teller would be

responsible for the truth of her testimony and would face the reliability sanction if she

defaulted on that responsibility.

In a way, this account of the teller's responsibility is an extended gloss on the fable of

the boy who cried wolf. The boy was morally wrong to inconvenience the villagers with

his false cries, and was wronging the villagers personally as well. The moral of the fable,

however, comes from the fact that no one believed the boy when the wolf did come.

3. Outline of Chapters

Chapter I defines the framework for the discussion of the epistemology of testimony.

Testimony is defined, strictly, as utterances that are meant to be believed on the teller's

say-so alone, not because of supporting arguments or any like considerations. A working

analysis of this notion of testimony is given, based on Grice's analysis of "non-natural"

meaning" in terms of the speaker's intention to induce belief by means of the hearer's

recognition of that intention (Grice 1957).[10] This analysis of testimony permits us to

frame the problem of the epistemology of testimony, how testimony can justify us in

believing what we are told.

Chapter II argues against General Evidentialism. First it distinguishes General

Evidentialism, the thesis that we are only justified in believing that most testimony is

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[9] Personal responsibility is the sort of responsibility that is at the heart of Thomson's account of word-giving, in which the speaker gives the hearer a claim on her in case her word turns out to be false (Thomson 1990).

[10] The restriction of this analysis to testimony, as opposed to meaning in general, circumvents many of the counterexamples to Grice's original account of meaning (discussed in Grice 1969).

reliable if we can gather evidence for this without relying on testimony, from Particular Evidentialism, that we are only justified in believing a particular thing that we are told if we have evidence for it. Against General Evidentialism, we adopt an argument due to Coady (Coady 1992) that it is impossible to attain the gather the sort of evidence demanded by General Evidentialism for a vindication of testimony. Therefore General Evidentialism would make the beliefs that we gain through testimony unjustified, which would entail an unacceptable skepticism. The rejection of General Evidentialism, we show, entails a principle like Burge's (Burge 1993), that a particular piece of testimony provides a justification for believing what is told unless there is positive evidence against its trustworthiness.

This rejection of the General Evidentialism does not entail the rejection of Particular Evidentialism, which the rest of this essay defends. First, Chapter III sets out the Assurance View, the main argument against Particular Evidentialism. The Assurance View is based on the valuable insight that testimonial justification depends on the teller's freely choosing her words with the intention to induce a belief in the hearer, and that this is atypical of many sorts of evidence. The Assurance View goes on, however, to argue that this dependence on the teller's free choice means that we must not, as Particular Evidentialism does, require the hearer to take particular testimony as evidence. This argument is based on two objections, which I call the Bad Faith Objection and the Disharmony Objection. The Bad Faith Objection is that the teller cannot offer her testimony as evidence while taking responsibility for it as a free choice of hers. The Disharmony Objection is that the hearer cannot take the teller's testimony as evidence while seeing her justification for belief as dependent on the teller's intention to induce

belief. Motivated by these objections, the Assurance View proposes that particular

testimony gives the hearer a non-evidential reason to believe that is grounded in the

teller's assurance of her testimony's truth.

Chapters IV through VII present the defense of Particular Evidentialism against the

Assurance View, and the derivation of the normative structure of testimony that is based

on the reliability sanction. Chapter IV gives a first approximation of the argument and

normative structure. First, we set out a crudely enumerative conception of evidence, on

which all evidence depends on subsuming phenomena under statistical generalizations.

Using this conception, it is shown that the teller's assurance of her testimony's truth does

not provide justification for belief except when it also provides evidence. Thus the non-

evidential justification posited by the Assurance View can only be present when an

evidential justification for belief is also present. (The Bad Faith and Disharmony

Objections, however, have not yet been met.) The reliability sanction is then derived

from this crude enumeration conception of evidence, demonstrating that the teller is

responsible for the truth of her testimony on pain of not deserving to be believed in the

future.

The crude enumeration conception of evidence used in Chapter IV is manifestly

oversimplified, as well as providing no resources to meet the Bad Faith and Disharmony

Objections. Chapter V sets out a less oversimplified conception of testimony as

evidence, which allows us to take into account testimony's nature as an intentional

action. This account of evidence is based on inference to the best explanation

(particularly as set forth by Lipton (1991). We then set out a basic account, dubbed the

SAC theory, of how particular acts of testimony may be explained, and thus how they

may provide evidence. The SAC theory also enables us to answer the Bad Faith Objection.

Chapter VI uses the SAC theory to give a general account of how testimony might serve as evidence for what is told. We analyze every possible case by which testimony might provide evidence according to the SAC theory. As in Chapter IV, it is shown that the teller's assurance of her testimony's truth does not provide justification for belief except when it also provides evidence. Particular Evidentialism thus remains better than the Assurance View at predicting the cases in which testimony provides justification for belief.

Chapter VII completes our defense of the Particular Thesis against the Assurance View. It rederives the reliability sanction using Chapter VI's analysis of testimony as evidence; though the application of the sanction takes a more complicated form, the sanction still enforces the teller's responsibility for the truth of her testimony. Using the SAC theory and the reliability sanction, we show how presenting testimony as evidence is compatible with offering an assurance of its truth, and taking it as evidence is compatible with accepting that assurance. We thus answer the Disharmony Objection, removing all motivation for accepting the Assurance View rather than the Particular Thesis.