

The Assurance View of Testimony

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the Assurance View of testimony as put forth by Angus Ross (1986) and Richard Moran (1999). The Assurance View holds that someone who offers testimony gives the hearer a non-evidential justification for belief by assuming responsibility for the truth of her testimony. I agree that testimonial justification depends on the teller's assumption of her responsibility for her testimony, but argue that it is nevertheless evidential justification. Testimonial justification is a sort of evidence that is within the teller's power to create or withhold at will, and that power is essential to the justification.

1. Introduction

In testimony, knowledge and action meet.¹ What other people tell you is an indispensable source of knowledge. Without testimony, we could know almost nothing about history and distant lands; the scientist could never rely on the experiments and observations of others; and nobody could be sure even of her own birthdate or parentage.² And telling someone something is an action if anything is. Rarely are words forced out of the teller's mouth; the teller chooses what to talk about and what to say about it. Indeed, she chooses whether to say what she believes, or whether to lie.

But we might doubt that testimony can give us knowledge, precisely because telling is a voluntary action. The person who tells us that City Hall is down the street and on the left could just as easily have chosen to say that it is all the way across town. Even if

doubts about tellers' sincerity do not lead us to resist believing testimony, testimonial justification can seem odd. If testimony justifies belief, it is a justification that other people create or withhold at will. Testimonial justification is literally a gift from the teller to the hearer; no other kind of justification is the immediate result of another's action in the same way.

Testimony's voluntary nature may seem an anomaly that we must explain away if we are to see testimony as providing justification, but some philosophers have placed just this voluntary nature at the foundation of their epistemology of testimony. Testimony justifies belief, they argue, because the teller assumes responsibility for the truth of what she says. This assumption of responsibility must be a free choice; so if the teller did not voluntarily choose her words, they could not provide the distinctively testimonial justification that they do. The teller offers an assurance that what she says is true, and the hearer can gain testimonial justification by accepting this assurance.

This Assurance View of testimony is intimated as long ago as Austin's argument that someone who claims knowledge can make herself responsible for the hearer's belief: "When I say 'I know', I *give others my word*: I *give others my authority for saying* that 'S is P'" (Austin 1946, p. 99). It has reached its fullest development, however, with Angus Ross (1986) and Richard Moran (1999), who apply their theory to all testimony, not just to knowledge claims. Ross and Moran hold that the teller provides a non-evidential justification for the hearer to believe what is told, by guaranteeing its truth. This guarantee is not nomological, as when we say that a prolonged period of sub-freezing temperatures guarantees that the river will freeze; it is normative, in that the teller makes herself personally responsible to the hearer for the truth of her testimony.

This essay critically examines the Assurance View, with particular attention to two claims: that testimonial justification is non-evidential and that it depends on the teller's assumption of responsibility for her testimony. The claim that testimony gives non-evidential justification is not clear on its face; it requires us to discuss what evidence is in a way that does not make the claim trivially false or trivially true. Nevertheless, I will argue against this claim as the Assurance View theorists intend it. When these theorists say that testimonial justification is non-evidential, they seem to mean that the hearer is not responsible for testimonially acquired belief in the same way as she is responsible for other beliefs that are justified evidentially. The hearer defers to the teller, so that the teller does the epistemic work and incurs (at least some of) the epistemic responsibility for the hearer's belief. It is as though the hearer were seeing with the teller's eyes and reasoning with the teller's expertise, and any fault in the hearer's belief lay with the teller.³

I will argue that this picture misleads; even though the teller is responsible for the truth of her testimony, this does not draw off any of the hearer's epistemic responsibility. The hearer should make full use of her rational faculties even when she accepts the hearer's authority. Thus testimony can be accommodated within an individualist epistemology. The individual has to rely to some extent on the testimony of others, but she must evaluate that testimony using her own rational powers.⁴

The Assurance View, however, is right about the most important point: Testimony is an assurance, and the hearer's justification for belief depends on the teller's assumption of responsibility for her testimony. Testimony gives the hearer a distinctive opportunity to believe the teller herself, as opposed to merely believing the proposition that the teller

expresses. If a speaker did not freely assume responsibility for her testimony, the hearer could not believe the speaker herself, even if the speaker's utterance somehow formed the basis for her belief. Thus the way in which testimony typically justifies belief depends essentially on the teller's freedom to choose what to say.

Testimony, then, is a voluntary action that can provide evidence to another, and the evidence provided depends on the teller's choice of words. When the teller can provide evidence, she can provide evidence for almost anything, regardless of its truth.⁵ Her power to choose is not an anomaly to be explained in taking her testimony as evidence; it is what makes her testimony into evidence for what is told. Indeed, if her testimony is connected to or caused by the truth of what she says, it is only because she chooses that it be so. Nor is it enough, in order for her testimony to provide distinctively testimonial evidence, that the teller choose her words; she must take responsibility for them.

The Assurance View is right, I will argue, that the teller offers an assurance of the truth of her testimony; to assume this responsibility is to offer this assurance. It is right, furthermore, that believing the teller is accepting this assurance. Where it goes wrong is in holding that this assurance is incompatible with evidential justification. Testimonial assurance provides a kind of evidence, and basing a belief on this evidence is the same as believing the speaker herself.

2. Testimony and Photographs

The first insight of the Assurance View is to note the importance of the teller's intentions. Testimony is paradigmatically intended to induce belief in a Gricean way.⁶ When *A* tells *B* that *p*, *A* intends for *B* to believe that *p*, and that *B*'s belief should be

based on the recognition of *A*'s testimonial intention.⁷ So if *A*'s intention is fulfilled, *B*'s justification for belief that *p* will depend on *A*'s intention to induce belief. In this way, testimony differs from the sort of justification provided by natural signs and scientific instruments, which yield evidence regardless of anyone's intention to induce beliefs in others. Indeed, when we contrast intention-dependent testimonial justification with intention-independent natural evidence, it becomes tempting to say that testimony does not provide evidence at all.

How might apparent evidence be affected by the discovery that it was intended to induce belief? Suppose that you have reason to think that the readings of a certain dial reflect the current running through a particular wire. You then learn that the dial is under the control of someone who changes its readings with the intentions of inducing you to believe certain things about the current. This will undermine your justification for believing that the current in the wire is what the dial says it is. When we take the dial's readings as evidence, we presuppose that it is an inanimate object with no agenda of its own. An ordinary dial can't decide to stop producing accurate readings of the current in the wire; it may break, but that is a different matter. If the dial is being manipulated by someone with an agenda, however, it should not be trusted. We must consider the intentions of the person who is manipulating the dial rather than considering the dial itself. As Moran says, putative evidence that has been manufactured in order to convince us of something "won't seem *better* evidence, or even just as good, but instead like something cooked-up, tainted, fraudulent" (Moran 1999, p. 11).

Note that the intentionally manipulated dial will not provide evidence of the current in the wire even if we discover that the artificially induced readings have always been

accurate in the past. We would, at least, need an explanation of why the person who controlled the dial had induced accurate readings; perhaps she wishes to lull us into a false sense of security so she can induce a false belief when it counts. Nor will reliabilism save the readings of this dial as evidence. On all but the most extreme versions of reliabilism, a belief that is obtained by a reliable method is not justified if it is defeated: if there is some reason to believe that the method might be wrong in this particular case. Reading the dial may have been a reliable method in the past, but it is defeated when we discover that the dial is being manipulated in order to induce belief.

We should not generalize hastily, however; something that is intended to induce belief can still provide unproblematic evidence that supports that belief. Consider photographs. As Moran observes, “an item like a photograph can serve as good evidence even if it was not only deliberately *presented*, but also deliberately *produced* so as to lead one to a particular conclusion” (Moran 1999, p. 16).⁸ A photographer may take a picture of a crime scene, intending for the picture to convince jurors that the window was broken in a certain pattern. The photographer’s intention to induce belief does not undermine the evidence that the photograph provides; the evidence provided is independent of the photographer’s intention.

The difference between the photograph and the previous example of the intentionally manipulated dial is that the photographer has only limited control over what her photograph will show. The photographer can choose not to photograph a scene, or not to display the resulting photograph, but she cannot choose to produce a photograph showing glass broken in a certain pattern unless the glass is in fact broken in that pattern. In the terminology of Dretske (1981), the photograph carries the information that the glass is

broken in this way; the photograph could not have been as it is if the glass had not been broken in this way.⁹ Though the photographer's intention to induce belief does not undermine the evidence the photograph provides, it does not strengthen the evidence either. The intention is simply irrelevant to the way in which the photograph conveys information. As Moran observes, the photograph would provide the same evidence even if it had not been intentionally produced, but had been taken by means of an automatic timing device.

Testimonial justification, however, is not independent of the teller's intention in this way. It would be mad to deny that the photographer's intention to induce belief disqualifies the photograph from serving as evidence, because the intention is a mere bystander to the process by which the photograph conveys information. To say that photographs do not provide evidence, we would have to stipulate that nothing can count as evidence if it has been touched by human hands. The teller's intention to induce belief is not irrelevant to testimonial justification in the same way, because the teller's control of her words is not limited. A teller who says one thing could just as easily have chosen to say the opposite. Her words are not restricted to recording the facts in the way that a camera is restricted to recording the scene before it. In this way testimony is like the dial that is completely under someone's control; if it indicates the truth, it is only because the person in control wants it to.

Indeed, testimonial justification depends on the teller's intention to induce belief. As noted at the beginning of this section, testimony has a Gricean structure: The hearer is intended to believe what she is told because she recognizes the teller's very intention to induce that belief. Consider what happens if we have taken a speaker's utterance as

testimony that p , and we then find out that she never intended us to believe that p at all.¹⁰ We must then reject any testimonial justification for belief that p that we might have thought we had. If someone says “A dog walked into a bar,” and she intends it as a joke that her hearers are not meant to believe, then the hearers cannot obtain justification for believing that a dog walked into a bar by believing the speaker herself—even if the speaker’s utterance does, by some deviant chain, give the hearers justification for believing that a dog walked into a bar. It is not that the hearers should disbelieve the speaker; believing the speaker is simply not at issue. As Moran points out (Moran 1999, p. 22), this is a difference between photographic evidence and testimony: A photograph that is intended as a joke provides evidence for what it shows in exactly the same way as any other photograph, but an utterance must be seriously intended to induce belief in order to justify belief in the way that testimony does.¹¹

This, then, seems like a major disanalogy between testimony and ordinary sorts of evidence. Testimony is under the speaker’s control; no matter what the teller wants the hearer to believe, within reason, she can issue the testimony that would justify the hearer in believing it. This testimony, in fact, only justifies belief because the teller intends it to be believed. The teller is granting or withholding justification as she pleases, with little restriction. She cannot justify the hearer in believing that the moon is made of green cheese, but if her testimony would not obviously be false or unjustified she has wide latitude. What restricts her is not the facts, but what she chooses to say.

It may seem as though evidence could not possibly be at a speaker’s beck and call in this way. In contrast, assurance is plainly the speaker’s to grant or withhold. She can control her normative commitments; indeed, a normative commitment could not be an

assurance unless it is the hearer's to grant and withhold. Hence, the fact that testimony is intended to induce belief, and that this intention is necessary for testimonial justification, supports the idea that testimonial justification depends on the teller's offering an assurance that her testimony is true.

3. Assurance

Only serious testimony, that which is intended to be believed, can justify belief in the distinctly testimonial way. But how can even serious testimony justify belief? The teller who says that p intends for the hearer to believe that p , and absent miscommunication the hearer recognizes that intention; but why should the hearer fall in line with the teller's intention?

Clarifying the question will foreclose one possible answer. The question is why, from the *epistemic* point of view, the hearer should take the teller's intention to induce belief that p as grounds for the very belief that p . What is it about believing that p that is somehow conducive to the epistemic goal of believing truths and avoiding falsehoods? There may be perfectly good reasons why it would be morally or prudentially good for the hearer to believe as the teller intends. Perhaps parents ought sometimes to believe their children's assertion that they will behave, even when the evidence goes against this assertion; it is part of their parental duties that they will trust their children in this way. A corporate yes-person might obtain the most rapid promotion if it believes whatever its boss wishes. If, however, the parent and the yes-person indeed ought to believe what they are told, then in these cases epistemic norms have simply come apart from moral and prudential norms. In ordinary cases the hearer is epistemically justified in believing the

teller when that belief is truth-conducive.¹² Adopting this purely epistemic standpoint, it makes no sense to say that the hearer ought to believe that p in order to oblige the teller; even if moral or prudential reasons sometimes justify belief in a certain sense, most of our testimonial justification will not be of this sort.¹³

So then, what is it about the teller's intention to be believed that makes the intention a justification for belief? It is not enough for the teller to inform the hearer of her intention to induce belief; she must take responsibility for the belief she intends to induce. (What sort of responsibility she must take, I will address in section 6.) Serious testimony requires this responsibility. As Moran puts it:

[I]f we are inclined to believe what the speaker says, but then learn that he is *not*, in fact, presenting his utterance as an assertion whose truth he stands behind, then what remains is just words, not a reason to believe anything (Moran 1999, p. 22).

Suppose someone says something to you, and adds "If you believe what I say, that's entirely your responsibility; I wash my hands of the consequences in case it turns out false." Then she is not telling you anything, and you do not have testimonial justification for believing what she says. The teller's disclaimer of responsibility means that she is not seriously offering what she says as in itself a justification for belief.

It is possible for a speaker to disclaim responsibility without draining all significance from her utterance. An inexperienced math student might suggest a line of inquiry to a professor by saying, "Perhaps this is the way to solve the problem; of course it's for you to figure out, I won't be responsible if you take my word for it." Then perhaps the professor will take the suggestion and discover that it works, so that she is justified in believing what the student said. Nevertheless, the justification that the professor gains is not testimonial. The student may have intended her utterance to bring the professor to

believe that the method works, but that intention is not what justifies the professor's belief. So long as the student disclaims responsibility for the truth of her suggestion, any justification it leads the professor to will be epistemically independent of the utterance itself. The professor would have the same justification no matter how she arrived at the proof. By contrast, an act of testimony itself can provide the hearer's justification for belief.

To tell someone something, then, is to take on a responsibility, just as to offer an assurance is to take on a responsibility. Furthermore, testimony and assurance share the Gricean structure.¹⁴ A speaker who offers an assurance, for instance a promise to see that the hearer has a ride home, puts the hearer in a position to accept the offer; if the hearer does accept the assurance, the speaker is responsible for her assurance. Such an assurance must be given intentionally; a speaker who does not intend to offer an assurance does not assume responsibility for it. For the hearer to accept the assurance, therefore, she must recognize that the speaker has intentionally offered an assurance. Knowing this, the speaker must intend to bring the hearer to accept the assurance (or to make her aware that she can accept it) by means of the hearer's recognition of that intention. This is a Gricean intention: an intention to produce an effect by means of the hearer's recognition of that intention.

The parallels between testimony and assurance suggest that telling someone something just is offering her an assurance of its truth. As Ross puts it, "The speaker, in taking responsibility for the truth of what he is saying, is offering his hearer not evidence but a *guarantee* that it is true, and in believing what he is told the hearer accepts this guarantee" (Ross 1986, p. 79-80). In section 5 I will dissent from the claim that

testimony is not offered as evidence. Otherwise, however, I agree with Ross's claim. The teller offers a guarantee for the truth of the testimony. If the hearer accepts this guarantee by believing the teller, then the teller bears a kind of responsibility for the hearer's belief.

To sum up: Because a teller explicitly intends her testimony to be taken as a reason for belief, she assumes responsibility for its truth. If not for this assumption of responsibility, her testimony could not provide testimonial reason for belief. Were the hearer to realize that the teller was not freely assuming responsibility for her testimony, she would not be able to obtain justification by believing the teller; indeed, there could be no question of believing the teller herself, but only of somehow coming to believe the proposition that she expressed. So if the teller intends to induce belief in a Gricean fashion, her assumption of responsibility must be overt. She must intend that the teller recognize her assumption of responsibility. That is, the teller assumes responsibility for her testimony and intends that assumption of responsibility to bring the hearer to belief. This is an assurance that the testimony is true. For the hearer to accept this assurance is to come to believe what the teller says as the teller intends, because the teller has made herself responsible for the truth of her testimony. Then the teller can obtain testimonial justification by believing the speaker.

4. Evidence and Shared Responsibility

In the previous section I argued for one of the two components of the Assurance View: that testimonial justification is based in the teller's assuring the hearer that her testimony is true. In the rest of this essay I shall criticize the other component: that

testimonial justification is non-evidential. As discussed in section 1, the meaning of this claim depends on the definition of ‘evidence’, and it is hard to define ‘evidence’ without begging the question. Ross and Moran seem to suggest, however, that the teller draws off some of the hearer’s responsibility for her beliefs. On this view, the responsibility that the teller assumes is the same kind of responsibility that the hearer would have for verifying one of her non-testimonial beliefs.

Such a view of testimony would threaten the traditional individualist epistemological project, passed down from Descartes and Locke. Broadly speaking, on this project the believer gathers evidence, which she then evaluates using her own rational capacities and only hers. If this were taken to mean that the only real evidence is that whose reliability the believer can verify without relying on other people, it would make it impossible to learn from evidence. No individual can gather enough testimony-independent evidence to verify the reliability of testimony.¹⁵ A milder individualism is possible, however. We could hold that being told that *p* provides *prima facie* evidence that *p*; the individual believer could then be responsible for aggregating all her evidence, including all the *prima facie* evidence provided by what she has been told, to arrive at justified beliefs.¹⁶ The idea that the teller takes on the hearer’s epistemic responsibility threatens even this milder individualism. The hearer would not just treat testimony as *prima facie* evidence for what is told, she would defer some of the work of evaluating evidence. Whether the hearer’s beliefs were justified might then depend on how the teller had evaluated her own evidence.¹⁷

Of course, whether the Assurance View theorists mean to undermine epistemological individualism depends on exactly what they mean by ‘evidence’. Since ‘evidence’ is a

technical term whose extension is in dispute, to define it would be likely to beg the question, much as stipulating a definition for ‘knowledge’ would short-circuit debates about knowledge.¹⁸ To be substantial, the dispute over whether testimonial justification is evidential will be in part a dispute about the best way to define ‘evidence’. Since natural signs and the readings of instruments uncontroversially provide evidence, the question will be how radically testimonial justification differs from justification obtained by observing nature or instruments.

As mentioned, my target is the view that the epistemic responsibility for testimonial belief is shared between the teller and hearer. This would be a radical difference between testimonial justification and non-controversial evidential justification, which we evaluate for ourselves even when it depends on the work of others (such as the makers of scientific instruments). Ross explicitly cites the teller’s responsibility for the hearer’s belief:

If it means anything to say that we are entitled to believe what we are told, it means that, where we have been told (and have believed) something false, although what we *believe* will then be open to criticism, we will not ourselves be open to criticism for having believed it. It means that we are in these circumstances absolved from the charge of not having taken due care over what we believe. If anyone is to be criticised on that score it will be our informant, or perhaps his informant (Ross 1986, pp. 82-3).

If the teller can be criticized for a defect in the hearer’s belief, then the teller must have taken over a measure of the hearer’s epistemic responsibility for that belief. By contrast, in uncontroversial cases of evidence there is no one else to criticize. The believer is the only person who may have failed to take due care over her own beliefs.

Ross may not mean anything controversial when he says that anyone who believes what she has been told is exempt from criticism for that belief. He may mean that when hearers are justified in believing what they have been told, the testimony exempts them from criticism. But when he postulates that the teller bears the same kind of

responsibility for the hearer's belief that a believer ordinarily bears for her own belief, he postulates a radical difference between testimony and other sources of justification. On Ross's view, the responsibility for taking due care over the truth of testimonial beliefs is (at least) partly the teller's. Hence testimonial belief would be warranted when both hearer and teller have exercised their responsibilities, while other beliefs are the believer's responsibility alone. In section 3, I concurred with the idea that testimonial justification depends on the teller's responsibility for her testimony; in sections 5 and 6, however, I will argue that this responsibility is not akin to the believer's epistemic responsibility.

Like Ross, Moran argues that testimonial justification is non-evidential, but he does not commit himself outright to the thesis of shared epistemic responsibility. Moran comes closer to defining 'evidence' so as to exclude testimony. Thus he says that "something is *evidence*, or is being treated as evidence, when it is a reason for belief independently of whether it was intentionally produced or presented as such" (Moran 1999, p. 18),¹⁹ and later remarks, "To offer some phenomenon as evidence is to present it as belief-worthy independent of the fact of one's presenting it as belief-worthy" (Moran 1999, p. 31). Any evidence that testimony provides would be independent of the responsibility that the teller takes for its truth. Since, as argued in section 3, testimonial justification does depend on the responsibility the teller assumes, this would exclude testimony as evidence.

Why might we take it that evidence provides a reason for belief independently of whether it is intended to provide such a reason? We might advert to something like shared epistemic responsibility. Evidence might be taken to be that which the believer

evaluates entirely on her own, as in my discussion of epistemological individualism at the beginning of this section. In that case, something that provides justification only because its creator presents it as providing justification might be thought not to be evidence; the believer would not evaluate it as justifying belief without the particular spin that the creator gave it. Then the idea would be that testimony cannot be evidence, because the teller has taken on some of the work of making it a reason for the teller to believe. The response will then be the same as that made concerning shared epistemic responsibility in sections 5 and 6: The work that the teller does is of a different kind from the work that the hearer must do to evaluate the testimony.

Alternatively, we might motivate Moran's definition of 'evidence' by observing that it does pick out an important distinction. Some things provide justification for belief regardless of how they are presented; others, like testimony, provide justification for belief because they are presented as justifying belief. As we will see, this means that we can often justify for other people whatever beliefs we choose, regardless of the facts; if testimonial justification is connected to the facts, that is only because we choose that it be so. The question is whether this difference between testimony and other forms of justification is radical enough that it should be taken to mark the boundary between evidential and non-evidential justification.

To answer this question, we will have to look at exactly how testimony justifies belief. In the next section, I will argue that testimonial justification is enough like non-controversial cases of evidence that it makes sense to call them all 'evidence'.

Testimonial justification has the same basic form as other kinds of justification.

5. Evidence and Motivation

We often draw conclusions from people's actions even though those actions were not intended to bring us to those conclusions. In such cases the actor does none of the epistemic work for the believer; the believer is solely responsible for her conclusions. It seems unproblematic that such beliefs are evidentially justified. This evidence is generally based on the factors and character traits that might have motivated or restrained the actor's choices. In this section, I shall show that testimonial justification also comes from considerations of the factors and character traits that motivate and restrain the teller's testimony. If non-testimonial actions provide observers with evidence, then we should also say that testimonial justification is evidential.

As an example of how non-testimonial actions provide evidence, consider the following scene from corporate life:

Alice and Sarah have pet projects whose fate is to be decided at a semi-secret board meeting. Sarah is present at the meeting, Alice is not. Afterward, Alice knows that Sarah's project has been vetoed, but she does not know by whom. Sarah then tells Alice that, at the meeting, Janet in particular argued vigorously against Alice's own project. Alice reasons that Sarah would not disclose details of this meeting without some underlying purpose, and that her purpose is to damage Janet by getting Alice angry with her. Alice concludes that Sarah herself is angry with Janet, and that Janet is probably the one who vetoed Sarah's project.

Let us stipulate that, in this story, Alice's knowledge of Sarah's character and the other background circumstances is such that all her conclusions are justified. Her justification comes from Sarah's testimony, but it is not distinctively testimonial justification. She does not believe Sarah or accept any assurance that Sarah offers. Nor is Sarah responsible for Alice's belief that Janet vetoed Sarah's project, in the way that we are responsible when someone believes what we tell her. Sarah may well have intended that

Alice not draw the conclusion she did. So Alice certainly does not believe that Janet vetoed Sarah's project because Sarah intended her to believe it.

Alice has inferred to the best explanation of the testimony, as she might infer to the best explanation of some completely intention-free phenomenon. Often, our inferences cannot be subsumed under any straightforward statistical generalization; yet if, given what we know, one hypothesis best explains the evidence, we are justified in inferring that hypothesis.²⁰ Alice may not be aware of any past statistics concerning Sarah's motivation for spreading rumors, but Sarah's testimony is best explained if Alice ascribes certain motivations to her, and so Alice is justified in ascribing those motivations. It is no different from a doctor who might infer that certain symptoms could only be explained if the patient had a certain disease, even if that doctor had no past experience those exact symptoms. (Of course the doctor must bring background knowledge to bear, but so must Alice.)

Alice's justification does depend on Sarah's presentation of her words as a reason to believe *something*. If Sarah had uttered the words "Janet argued against your project" as a joke, Alice would not have been justified in thinking that Sarah wanted to make her angry with Janet, and Alice's further conclusions would have been blocked.²¹ If we take Moran's definition of 'evidence' to mean that the evidence that an utterance provides must be independent of whether the utterance was produced with the intention of inducing *any* belief, then Alice's justification is non-evidential.

This would amount to the implausible stipulation that testimony can never provide evidence of anything but the speaker's vocal powers, even when the hearer deduces something unrelated to the topic of the testimony. Indeed, Moran acknowledges that

testimony can provide evidence in cases like Alice's: "It is always possible to treat anything a person says or does as constituting further evidence for the question at hand" (Moran 1999, p. 35).²² So a more plausible interpretation of Moran's definition is that the evidence that an utterance provides that p must be independent of whether the utterance was produced with the intention of inducing the particular belief that p . On that definition, Alice does obtain evidence that Janet vetoed Sarah's proposal by considering what motivated Sarah to say that Janet argued against Alice's proposal.

Straightforward testimonial justification, in which the hearer believes the teller, similarly proceeds by inferences concerning the teller's psychological states and motivations. Suppose that Alice is about to leave the house, and Sarah says, "They've closed I-279." If we were to elaborate reasoning that would justify Alice in believing that I-279 is closed, it might run as follows:²³

Sarah is telling me that they've closed I-279, in an attempt to induce belief. Sarah is a fairly honest person; it would take a fairly strong motivation for her to lie to me. There's no such motivation here, so she must believe that they've closed I-279. In addition, Sarah is reasonably careful; she wouldn't tell me about the conditions on I-279 unless she had some basis for her belief. That means that her belief that they've closed I-279 is probably accurate.

This is a typical case of how one comes to believe what one is told: One reasons (implicitly) that the teller is likely to believe what she says and that her belief is likely to be accurate.

There seems to be no radical difference between Alice's reasoning in this case and in the corporate case. In each case Alice's reasoning adverts to the motivations for Sarah's actions. Sarah tells the truth about I-279 because she lacks the motive to lie, and she tells Alice about Janet's alleged opposition because she has the motive to injure Janet. In each case, the justification for Alice's belief depends on the fact that Sarah presents her

testimony as a reason for belief. If Sarah did not mean Alice to believe that Janet had argued against her proposal, there would be no reason for Alice to think that Sarah meant to injure Janet; if Sarah did not mean Alice to believe that two lanes of I-279 were closed, there would be no reason for Alice to believe that Sarah thought that the lanes were closed, and so no reason to think the lanes were closed.

Testimonial justification, then, rests on the same patterns of inference as some other sorts of evidence. Testimonial belief also requires of the hearer the same sort of epistemic responsibilities as beliefs with other bases. The hearer must take exactly the same care over a belief acquired through testimony as she must over any other belief acquired through inference to the best explanation; she must make sure that the explanation she infers to really is the best. Consider again Sarah's testimony about I-279. If Alice knows that Sarah and Janet have made a large bet over whether Alice will drive down I-279 today, then she is not justified in believing Sarah's testimony that I-279 is closed. The hypothesis that Sarah wants to win the bet explains her testimony just as well as does the hypothesis that she wants to pass along true and useful information. If Alice knows that Sarah reads traffic updates on an unreliable website, then her belief that I-279 is closed can be explained by the hypothesis that the website made a mistake just as well as by the hypothesis that Sarah has good reason to think that I-279 is closed. In either case, Alice's inference that I-279 is closed is blocked by the competing explanation for Sarah's testimony, and Sarah's testimony does not give Alice justification for believing that I-279 is closed.

Thus we see why Ross is wrong to say that, when a testimonially acquired belief is false, criticism should be directed at the teller rather than the hearer. The hearer is fully

responsible for taking care that her belief is justified. Sometimes, because she does not know about the teller's defaults, she may be able to deflect criticism for a false belief. If Alice does not know about Sarah's bet, she is justified in believing Sarah when she says that I-279 is closed. But this case is no different from cases that do not involve testimony. If Alice reads a scientific instrument that she does not know to be broken, then she can deflect criticism for the resulting false belief. This is not because someone else bears epistemic responsibility for Alice's false belief—it need not even be anyone's fault that the instrument is broken—but because she has taken due care over her belief. In each case, Alice bears full epistemic responsibility for her belief, but that responsibility is discharged when she reads an instrument or listens to a teller that she has reason to think trustworthy. The similarities between the cases are more important than the differences, and so there is no reason to deny that testimonial justification is evidential.

6. Credibility and Responsibility

In section 3, I argued that the teller voluntarily assumes responsibility for the truth of her testimony, and that testimonial justification depends on this assumption of responsibility. In section 5, I argued that the hearer retains full responsibility for testimonial belief; the teller does not draw off any of the hearer's epistemic responsibility. What, responsibility then, does the teller assume? In this section, I shall argue that the teller must assume responsibility for her testimony by staking her credibility on it. The teller assures the hearer of what she says by offering up a bit of her

credibility, which she will lose unless her testimony is true or at least based on good reasons.²⁴

On the Gricean analysis, testimony is overtly intended to induce belief. The teller intends the hearer to believe what she tells her, intends this intention to be recognized, and indeed intends this intention to be the basis of the hearer's belief. Someone who loses her credibility loses the power to induce belief in this way. This would be a serious setback; the least of it is that such a person's testimonial intentions would be thwarted.²⁵ Yet this loss of credibility is exactly what should befall someone who consistently offers false testimony. Loss of credibility can be seen as the punishment appropriate for violating one's responsibility to tell the truth, or at least to take care over one's testimony.

Consider the epistemic effect of false testimony. Someone who tells a falsehood has either lied or given voice to a false belief. If she has lied, then she provides evidence that telling the truth is not of paramount importance to her. As discussed in section 5, we are justified in believing someone who tells us that p only if the best explanation of the testimony is that the teller believes that p . If we have a bit of evidence that truth is not important to the teller, then the hypothesis that she believes what she says is that bit worse as an explanation, and we are that bit less justified in believing her. Similarly, if the teller bases her testimony on a false belief, she provides evidence that she is not an authority on the topic of testimony, and further that she is willing to offer testimony where she lacks authority. When we believe a teller, we believe not only that she believes what she says but also that her belief is correct. If she is willing to offer testimony where she lacks authority, then her testimony can be explained without

supposing that it is based on correct belief. Again, false testimony weakens future testimony as evidence for what is said.

We must qualify the point about testimony based on a false belief. One piece of false testimony may not weaken a teller's future credibility, if she sincerely believes what she says and if her belief is justified but unlucky. Even an authority can be exposed to misleading evidence. If she offers false testimony based on that evidence, it does not indicate any lack of authority or willingness to offer testimony without authority. Conversely, testimony that is true by luck may still weaken the teller's credibility. When we realize that she based her testimony on inadequate evidence, we should conclude that she is willing to offer testimony without authority, which means that it will be easier to explain future testimony without supposing that it is correct.

Luck must run out, however. If someone consistently offers false testimony for which she seems to have adequate justification, we should conclude that she is bad at arriving at the truth but good at coming up with plausible-sounding justifications for her mistakes. If someone consistently offers true testimony based on what looks like inadequate evidence, we should conclude that she has the authority to detect the truth but is bad at explaining how she does so. In the long run, credibility tracks truth rather than justification.²⁶

The teller thus stakes her credibility on her testimony; if it turns out that her testimony is false and she has not taken due care that it be true, her future testimony will be weaker as a justification for belief. So the epistemology of testimony is enough to determine the teller's responsibility for the truth of her testimony. If the teller does not at least take care to live up to that responsibility, future hearers ought not to fall in line with

her intentions to induce beliefs through testimony, because they will not be epistemically justified in believing her. Thus the responsibility that the teller must have for her testimony does not draw off the hearer's epistemic responsibility for her beliefs. In fact, the teller is responsible for her testimony *because* the hearer is fully responsible for her own beliefs, and so is epistemically obliged to reject testimony from an unreliable informant.

What remains is to show that testimonial justification does depend on the teller's voluntary assumption of responsibility. If a speaker avoids this responsibility, i.e., avoids staking her credibility, then her utterance will not provide testimonial justification. For the only way to prevent an utterance from affecting her future testimony would be to make clear that the utterance was not offered as testimony. False testimony reduces future credibility by impugning the teller's sincerity or care to verify what she says. It is certainly possible to utter something whose falsity would not reflect lack of these traits; the most honest and careful person may choose to utter something false as an overt joke. The overt joke, however, cannot give the hearer testimonial justification. Only serious testimony can, and serious testimony risks the teller's credibility.

The teller, then, voluntarily assumes responsibility for her testimony by offering it as serious testimony. The assurance thus offered is backed by the teller's credibility, in two senses. First, her credibility is what makes the assurance in the justification for belief; second, her credibility is what she will lose if her assurance turns out to be false. When the hearer believes the teller, she reasons that the teller is credible enough for her testimony to justify belief. To do so, she must recognize the assurance that the teller has

offered, because it is this assurance that adverts to the teller's credibility. To believe the teller is to accept this assurance by relying on the teller's credibility.

I conclude by emphasizing how testimony's voluntary nature distinguishes it from evidence that can exist without human intervention. It is essential to testimonial evidence that the teller can create or withhold this evidence at will. The teller's credibility depends on her sincerity and her care in restricting her testimony to areas in which she has authority. Each of these is a trait that governs the teller's choices of what to say. Neither would be brought into play if the teller were not choosing her own words.²⁷ So testimony justifies belief, if it justifies belief at all, because the teller has the trait of choosing to tell the truth—to say what she believes and to take care that those beliefs are correct.

Veridical evidence generally has some connection to the facts it reveals. For instance, when *A* causes *B* by some natural process, *B* often provides evidence of *A*'s existence. True testimony that justifies belief is connected to the facts that are reported, but testimonial evidence cannot be reduced to processes that operate without human intervention. When we believe based on testimonial justification, we see the teller as someone who will choose to be trustworthy. The teller's testimony is connected to the facts she reports, but only because the teller chooses to make that connection.

¹ In this essay, I will use the word 'testimony' to refer to any assertion that is meant to be believed on the teller's say-so, or presented as such. This is broader than the common use of 'testimony', which is usually restricted to formal settings, but narrower than the class of all assertions. For instance, reminders and reasoned arguments do not count as testimony, because rather than simply accepting what is said, the hearer is meant to

(respectively) remember that what is said is true or infer what is said according to the speaker's argument. I will use 'tell' as cognate with 'testimony', so that testimony is what one person tells another.

² See Coady (1992), pp. 6-7, for a striking parable of our dependence on testimony.

³ The Assurance View is not the only view that suggests that the hearer shares in the teller's capacities. Coady, for instance, claims that "testimony puts us in touch with the perceptions, memories, and inferences of others" (Coady 1994, p. 78), and that this access is not itself inferential, while Burge (1993) holds that testimony transmits its content directly from the teller to the hearer. As Moran points out, Coady's and Burge's arguments address the general status of testimony rather than the specific relation between the teller and hearer; in particular, they do not cite the teller as offering assurance. The arguments in section 5 against non-evidentialism might also be taken to show that it is not helpful to speak of direct access, as Coady and Burge do.

⁴ This is not meant to imply that testimonial justification must be reducible to other sorts of justification that depend only on the individual, such as perception, memory, and induction. I agree with Foley (1994) that a believer must sometimes grant authority to the testimony of others if she is to avoid skepticism.

We must here distinguish, as Fricker (1994, 1995) does, between global and local reductionism. Global reductionism is the thesis that we must gather testimony-free evidence that testimony is generally reliable in order to have any testimonial justification at all; local reductionism is the thesis that, in order to be justified in accepting an individual piece of testimony, we must evaluate the evidence concerning its reliability. This essay argues for local reductionism but not global reductionism. Indeed, I have argued (Weiner 2003) that local reductionism requires an acceptance principle like that of Burge (1993), according to which testimony justifies belief unless there is positive evidence against its reliability. Accordingly, my discussion of the importance of the teller's agency does not contradict the argument of Graham (2003) that testimony's agentic nature does not prevent it from providing default justification, as do perception and memory.

My emphasis on individual responsibility is not meant to deprecate social epistemology. Coady, for instance, points out that, realizing that testimony is indispensable, we may decide that the epistemological question is “How do *we* come to know?” rather than “How do *I* come to know?” (Coady 1992, p. 150); but surely both questions may be asked. To say that the individual bears responsibility for her own reasoning processes is not to say that she is debarred from relying on the word of others unless she can prove that others are reliable.

⁵ Assuming that the teller is capable of lying smoothly; many of us may lack that ability. Fricker (1995) emphasizes the evidence we get for the teller’s sincerity by monitoring her for signs of insincerity, but she may exaggerate the effectiveness of such monitoring. Graham (2003, note 13) cites claims in the psychological literature that such monitoring relies on signs that do not correspond to how liars actually behave.

⁶ Some testimony may not be intended to induce belief at all. I may tell you that it will rain today, not to be believed, so I can say “I told you so” when you get wet. Paradigmatically, however, testimony is intended to be believed; and all testimony is intentionally presented as providing some justification for belief. For the remainder of the paper, I shall speak as though all testimony is intended to be believed.

⁷ This account of testimony is based on the account of non-natural informative meaning in Grice (1957). The Gricean intention is not sufficient to make an utterance into testimony; the speaker may intend the hearer’s recognition of her intention to lead the hearer to belief in some deviant way, akin to the examples given in Strawson (1964). Many of the other counterexamples to Grice’s account of meaning (see Grice 1969) do not involve cases of testimony. See also note 6 above; in non-paradigmatic cases, testimony may not be intended to induce belief.

Note that the claim is not that *A* consciously formulates the complicated Gricean intention, or that *B* consciously recognizes it. The intention and recognition will almost always be implicit.

⁸ Cf. Ross: “There is, of course, nothing odd about the idea of deliberately presenting an audience with evidence in order to get them to draw a desired conclusion, as when a photograph is produced [i.e., displayed] in court” (Ross 1986, p. 72).

⁹ If the photograph could have been manipulated (by digital processing for instance), then it need not carry information about the scene. It might show broken glass even though the photographed glass was not broken. In such a case we must consider the intentions of the photographer (or of anyone else who had the opportunity to manipulate the photograph). If we discover that she has a high stake in inducing a belief that the glass was broken, and that she could easily have manipulated the photograph to show broken glass even if the window was not broken, then the photograph is undermined as evidence of the broken glass. The discussion of photographs in the text should be taken to refer to photographs like instant snapshots, which cannot be manipulated in this way.

¹⁰ Assume that this utterance is not the kind of testimony that the teller does not want to be believed, for instance because she wishes to say “I told you so” later. See note 6 above; this kind of testimony is non-paradigmatic, and even this kind of testimony is *presented* as providing a reason to believe that *p*.

¹¹ We must assume not only that the photograph has not been manipulated, as in note 9 above, but that its intention as a joke does not make it more likely that the scene depicted was posed. For instance, in the movie *Picture Perfect*, the heroine is photographed sitting on the hero’s lap as a joke. Regardless of whether or not the viewer is in on the joke, the photograph provides evidence that the heroine was sitting on the hero’s lap; only if the viewer is not in on the joke does it (seem to) provide evidence that the two are romantically involved. (The two eventually become romantically involved because the picture so depicts them; in fact, given the sort of movie *Picture Perfect* is, it is an iron law that the picture will bring them together. That, however, is a deviant causal chain.)

¹² To say that a method is truth-conducive is not necessarily to say that it is produced by an objectively reliable method; truth-conduciveness need not be determined externalistically. In “Why Does Justification Matter?” (unpublished), I argue that, even if we emphasize that beliefs should be truth-conducive, we can still hold to something like an internalist conception of justification (more precisely, a conception of justification as completely dependent on our experiences, be they internalist or not).

¹³ Baker argues that in cases where we trust our friends, even though our beliefs may outrun the evidence (as does the parents’ trust of their children), there is no “conflict

between morality and rationality, between *decent* belief as opposed to *rational* belief” (Baker 1987, p. 6), in part because friendship trust is indispensable. I do not think, however, that she has made the case that friendship trust typically outruns the evidence; she focuses too much on evidence of the friends’ behavior in similar situations, and not enough on how we use our knowledge of our friends’ character to predict their behavior. As she observes, our belief in our friends’ good character resists counter-evidence, but this is no different from scientists’ belief in well-established theories. We believe that evidence against our friends can be explained away, until the evidence becomes overwhelming; similarly, we believe that results that seem to conflict with the best available theories can be explained away, until the anomalies become overwhelming. Cases in which we ought to believe against the evidence may thus be much rarer than Baker supposes. Accordingly, it is plausible to treat those as conflicts between epistemic obligations and obligations of friendship, without saying that we often think people ought to violate their epistemic obligations.

In conversation, Elijah Millgram has suggested that our general justification for believing what others say may rest on interpersonal rather than epistemic obligations. The idea is that empirical evidence indicates that people are generally unreliable, and our only justification for generally believing them is a Kantian respect for them as persons. On this view, Baker would be partly vindicated; it would be impossible to separate our general epistemic obligations from our general interpersonal obligations. It would, however, still be possible to ask: Given that we are generally justified in believing others’ testimony, what beliefs are most truth-conducive on a dispassionate consideration of the evidence? These would be the best beliefs from the epistemic standpoint, but perhaps not from the moral or prudential standpoint. So epistemic norms could still have local conflicts with other norms. (I thank Elijah Millgram for pressing the point addressed here.)

¹⁴ This emphasis on the Gricean structure of testimony and assurance is due to Moran.

¹⁵ See Coady (1992) and the other works cited in note 4 above.

¹⁶ The position sketched is essentially the combination of Fricker's acceptance of local, but not global, reductionism (Fricker 1994, 1995) with a Burgean acceptance principle (Burge 1993). See note 4 above, and Weiner (2003).

¹⁷ Such conclusions are not unique to the Assurance View. Burge (1993), for instance, argues that the content of testimony is transmitted directly from the teller to the hearer, so that the justificational status of the belief is also transmitted directly from the teller to the hearer.

¹⁸ For instance, it would not be implausible to define 'evidence' as whatever it is in a subject's experiences that determines which beliefs of hers are epistemically justified. (This is roughly what Conee and Feldman (1986) do; their argument concerns the contention that justification depends not only on the evidence found in the subject's experiences, but also on the subject's cognitive capacities.) On this definition, it would be trivial that testimony provides evidence. Compare Williamson's argument that all one's knowledge is evidence (Williamson 1997, 2000); this also makes it trivial that testimony provides evidence, yet Williamson says nothing that seems incompatible with the Assurance View.

¹⁹ Moran describes the quoted passage as a "claim to examine," but his subsequent argument makes it clear that he endorses that claim.

²⁰ See Harman (1967) and Lipton (1991).

²¹ A joke like this might reveal unconscious hostility toward Janet on Sarah's part, which would then warrant the conclusion that Janet vetoed Sarah's project. Reasoning from this unconscious hostility, however, would be quite different from reasoning from the conscious hostility evidenced by Sarah's serious testimony that Janet argued against Alice's project.

²² Ross makes similar remarks: "The problem is not... that the fact of our having chosen to use certain words *cannot* be evidence for some further conclusion. Our choices can certainly be revealing" (Ross 1986, p. 72).

²³ Of course Alice will not consciously rehearse this chain of reasoning. On the other hand, she is unlikely to consciously rehearse the chain of reasoning in the corporate melodrama either. In both cases, the explicit reasoning presented in the text is an

elaboration of the considerations to which Alice should be sensitive. If any of the steps in the explicit reasoning is unjustified, then Alice's belief is unjustified.

²⁴ I do not mean to imply that the only way in which the teller is responsible for her testimony is that she stakes her credibility on its truth. She has a moral responsibility not to lie, and she may make herself personally responsible to the hearer for any consequences that follow from the hearer's believing her; see the discussion of word-giving in Thomson (1990). The responsibility discussed in this essay is the only kind that follows inevitably from the epistemology of testimony.

²⁵ See Craig (1990) for more discussion of the importance of being able to tell others things. Craig sees the notion of being a reliable informant as the foundation of the concept of knowledge.

²⁶ It is not surprising that someone who has occasionally violated the responsibility to tell the truth can avoid loss of credibility if she has taken due care to live up to the responsibility. Although she has not technically fulfilled her responsibility, her testimony has what DeRose (2003) calls secondary propriety, in that she had every reason to believe that she was living up to her responsibility. Secondary propriety applies to most norms, and generally (as with testimony) someone whose acts usually have secondary propriety will usually conform to the primary norm in the long run. (DeRose cites secondary propriety in support of the norm that a speaker ought to know what she asserts, which is stronger than my claim that testimony ought to be true; in "Must We Know What We Say?" [unpublished] I argue that there is no general knowledge norm on assertion.)

²⁷ This may help explain one of the epistemological—as opposed to the moral—problems with compelling someone to talk. Someone who talks under torture will talk about what the torturer wants, whether or not the victim knows anything about the subject, so what the victim says will be unreliable.

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