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Learning from presupposition

Dominic Alford-Duguid

Department of Philosophy, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Correspondence
Dominic Alford-Duguid, Department of Philosophy, University of British Columbia, 1866 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada.
Email: dominic.alford.duguid@gmail.com

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P. F. Strawson famously distinguishes what a speaker *presupposes* from what she *asserts* in uttering a sentence like "The present King of France is bald". This paper defends a claim about presupposition's epistemic significance, namely that presupposition can provide a distinctive testimony-based way for an audience to learn about the world.

KEYWORDS
informative presupposition, Strawson, testimony, warrant

1 | INTRODUCTION

Russell (1905) famously argued that an assertion of

(1) "The present King of France is bald"

asserts that there exists a present King of France, and no more than one present King of France, and that person is bald. Strawson (1950) resisted this account. His disagreement with Russell was not over the conditions under which (1) is true. Both agreed that (1) is true just if there exists a present King of France, and no more than one present King of France, and that person is bald. Strawson instead distinguished between the content *asserted*, and the content *presupposed* by an assertion. In the case of (1), Strawson argued that when there is a present King of France, a speaker who asserts (1) says, of the present King of France, that he is bald. Yet in so doing, the speaker does not also assert that there is only one present King of France: he presupposes it.

Foundational work on presupposition often seeks to explain what it is for a speaker to presuppose something. For Strawson, a speaker presupposes that p just if the truth of p is a necessary condition for the speaker's utterance to express a proposition. By contrast, on Stalnaker's (1970) "pragmatic" account a speaker presupposes that p only if she takes p for granted for the purposes of a given conversation. Thus, whereas Strawson's account is broadly semantic, Stalnaker takes presupposition to be a distinctive attitude speakers can adopt within a conversation.

Rather than focus on what presupposition *is*, I wish to explore a particular question about what presupposition does. I defend a claim about presupposition's epistemic significance,

namely that presupposition can provide a distinctive testimony-based way for an audience to learn about the world. Inspiration for my view derives in part from a neglected observation from Strawson (1950), and it is with this observation that I begin.

2 | STRAWSON'S OBSERVATION

Strawson imagines a situation in which someone says to you, quite seriously, "The King of France is wise", and then asks whether what she said was true or false. After first insisting that you would be inclined to say that the speaker's utterance is neither true nor false, Strawson goes on as follows:

> You might, if he were obviously serious (had a dazed astray-in-the-centuries look), say something like: "I'm afraid you must be under a misapprehension. France is not a monarchy. There is no king of France". And this brings out the point that if a man seriously uttered the sentence, his uttering it would in some sense be *evidence* that he *believed* that there was a king of France. It would not be evidence for his believing this simply in the way in which a man's reaching for his raincoat is evidence for his believing that it is raining. But nor would it be evidence for his believing this in the way in which a man's saying, "It's raining" is evidence for his believing that it is raining. We might put it as follows. To say, "The king of France is wise" is, in some sense of "imply", to *imply* that there is a king of France. (Strawson, 1950, p. 330)

This short passage in which Strawson suggests a distinctive epistemic profile for presupposition is striking in part for its almost complete detachment from the semantic focus of the passages that bracket it. Strawson's core observation is that what a speaker presupposes in making an utterance can provide an audience with a special kind of evidence.[1] Since Strawson does not elaborate beyond what I quote above, his observation remains both gnomic and largely undefended.

My own argument draws upon Strawson's suggestive discussion at several crucial points. The argument has three parts. In Section 3, I bring out presupposition's distinctive epistemic profile by showing that an audience can learn from a speaker's presuppositions even when she regards a speaker's assertion as resting upon a false presupposition. I use that result in Section 4 to argue that presupposition provides a distinctive way for an audience to learn about the world. And in Sections 5 and 6, I motivate the view that when an audience learns from a speaker's presuppositions in this way, she thereby acquires a testimony-based belief.

3 | PRESUPPOSITION SURVIVES EXTRAORDINARY DEFEAT

Strawson allows that a speaker who asserts "It's raining", and the original speaker who presupposes that France has a king, each provide evidence about their respective beliefs (namely, that

[1]Strawson's observation does not ultimately depend upon his choice of an example involving a definite description, and so it would survive even if we sided with Russell about sentences like (1). Russell therefore might accept Strawson's observation; their disagreement would become in part an argument over which linguistic phenomena display presupposition's distinctive epistemic profile.

the first believes it to be raining, and that the second believes France has a king). He insists that the evidence in the two cases somehow differs in kind. Yet it is far from clear at this stage that Strawson is right to insist upon a distinction in kind. In each case, a speaker makes a public commitment about the world—that it is raining, or that France has a king—and an audience rejects the commitment as false. And despite that rejection, the audience can treat the public commitment as evidence for a doxastic commitment, perhaps on the grounds that the public commitment would be inappropriate (in this case, deceptive) without a corresponding doxastic commitment (e.g., without the speaker believing that it is raining). So far, there does not seem to be any basis for the evidential contrast Strawson draws between assertion and presupposition.

What obscures Strawson's insight, at least when it comes to the contrast between assertion and presupposition, is his choice to focus on the way in which a speaker's assertions and presuppositions can inform her audience about her beliefs. Because the hearer in Strawson's case knows that France has no king, she can take the speaker's presupposition as evidence only about the speaker's beliefs. But this sort of case is unusual. In standard cases of testimony, a hearer does not know in advance whether a speaker's presuppositions are false. And in these cases, a speaker's presuppositions can be informative about how things stand in the world. Suppose that someone knows nothing about the United Kingdom, and then her friend tells her:

(2) "The King of the United Kingdom was born before 1950".

In asserting (2), the speaker puts the hearer in a position to learn not only that the King of the United Kingdom was born before 1950, but that the United Kingdom possesses exactly one king. Yet if Strawson is right about definite descriptions, the latter claim is not asserted, but presupposed by someone who asserts (2). Hence, a speaker's presuppositions can provide hearers with new information about how things stand in the world. And this has long been recognised by those working on presupposition as the phenomenon of "informative presupposition". While explicit recognition of informative presupposition is usually credited to Karttunen (1974) and Stalnaker (1973, p. 449, 2014, pp. 56–57), the passage from Strawson shows him to be aware of the phenomenon (as his final sentence makes clear). Informative presupposition also plays an important role in well-known discussions of the social and testimonial significance of presupposition (e.g., Langton, 2017; Langton & West, 1999; Sbisa, 1999).[2]

Instead of such an unusual case, Strawson might have begun with examples like the following:

> Centenarian Emperor: Simone knows almost nothing about Japan, and certainly nothing about its specific institutional structures. One day, her friend Thomas says to Simone: "The Emperor of Japan is over a hundred years old!" Simone remembers that no monarch is a centenarian, and so rejects her friend's claim as false.

Despite rejecting Thomas' assertion as false, Simone can still learn something new from what Thomas presupposes, namely that Japan has an emperor. While this case relies upon a Strawsonian view about what we ordinarily presuppose with our use of definition descriptions, it is easy to construct cases using different types of presupposition.[3]

[2]Cases of informative presupposition are also taken by some to pose a challenge to Stalnaker's pragmatic account of presupposition (cf. Abbott, 2008; Garcia-Carpintero, 2016).

[3]See Abbott (2000, 2008) for an array of such cases.

Centenarian Emperor shows that presupposition-based knowledge can survive assertion's defeat. An audience can learn about the world from a speaker's presuppositions even when the audience knows the speaker's utterance to be false. This result suggests a distinction between the epistemic profiles of assertion and presupposition, since when an audience knows that a speaker's assertion is false, the audience cannot learn about the world from what the speaker asserts (at least not in an ordinary testimony-based way).[4]

The result also serves to partially distinguish the respective epistemic profiles of presupposition and entailment. When a speaker asserts that q, and q entails p (and not-q does not also entail p), and an audience believes that p solely in virtue of those facts, the audience must withdraw that belief when she learns that the speaker's utterance was false. For instance, if Simone were to accept Thomas at his word, and come to believe not only that the Emperor of Japan is over a hundred, but also that the Emperor is no mere nonagenarian, she would have to withdraw both beliefs upon remembering that no monarch is a centenarian. By contrast, Simone could retain her presupposition-based belief that Japan has an emperor.

While Centenarian Emperor serves to partially distinguish the epistemic profiles of presupposition and entailment, it fails to fully distinguish them, and thus fails to completely reveal the distinctiveness of presupposition's epistemic profile. To see why, remember that on Strawson's account of presupposition, a speaker's utterance presupposes p just if p's truth is a necessary condition for the utterance to express a proposition. Strawson's account therefore entails that a speaker's utterance presupposes p just if, on the assumption that the utterance expresses q, both q's being true and its being false entail p. For all that has been shown so far, Strawson could therefore treat cases like Centenarian Emperor as merely special instances of an audience learning from what a speaker's utterance entails. He could insist that because an audience in Centenarian Emperor has every reason to trust both that the speaker's utterance expresses a proposition (namely that the Emperor of Japan is over a hundred), and that this proposition is either true or false (perhaps because the audience accepts that every proposition is true or false), the audience preserves her entitlement to believe what follows from both the Emperor of Japan being over a hundred and the Emperor of Japan not being over a hundred (i.e., that there is an Emperor of Japan).[5]

[4]A reviewer suggests a nice case that helpfully brings out the need for the parenthetical qualification.

> Evelyn says to Dawn: "that shape is red and round". Dawn has no special reason to doubt that the shape is red, but she knows the shape is square. She also knows that Evelyn is much better at identifying colours than at identifying shapes.

Dawn plausibly acquires knowledge about the world in this case, despite knowing that Evelyn's assertion is false. But is this knowledge acquired in an ordinary testimony-based way? Surely not. Dawn possesses specific knowledge about Evelyn's reliability with respect to identifying colours, and without this knowledge it is far from clear that Dawn would be in a position to learn about the shape's colour from Evelyn's assertion. Yet testimonial knowledge transmission cannot ordinarily require that an audience already know, of the speaker, how reliable she is with respect to the specific question at issue (though see footnote 14 for discussion of how this claim fits into broader disputes about the epistemology of testimony). So, while the case might be classed as a case of testimonial knowledge transmission, its unusual features mean that it is not a genuine counterexample to the (qualified) claim in the text.

[5]In this example I am intentionally working within Strawson's own (controversial) framework. Notoriously, Strawson (1950) thought that the only way for a sentence of the form "The F is G" to be false is for a given object—namely the F—to not be G. Strawson claimed that if nothing is F, or if more than one object is F, then the sentence fails to express a proposition, and so lacks a truth value. However, he later adopts a more agnostic position about presupposition failure in Strawson (1964), partly in response to pressure from Dummett (1959). See footnote 11 for a brief sketch of Dummett's concern about the stability of Strawson's original position.

However, Strawson's choice to focus on a case where a presupposition is known to be false suggests an even more distinctive epistemic profile for presupposition. Consider the following case:

> Two Popes: A hermit journeys to Rome in 1380 after two years in total seclusion following the death of Pope Gregory XI. Eager for news after his long absence, he asks a friendly shopkeeper about the state of the Church. The shopkeeper says "The popes are fighting". The hermit is taken aback, and thinks to himself: "Well, the man is clearly confused, but at least there's a pope!" (Unbeknownst to the hermit, there really are two popes: one in Rome, the other in Avignon.)

Strawson would claim that the shopkeeper's utterance presupposes both that there is a pope, and that there are at least two popes.[6] And the hermit rejects the shopkeeper's assertion because he rejects one of these two presuppositions: He (mistakenly) believes that there cannot be more than one pope. Strawson would therefore insist that the hermit must regard the shopkeeper as failing to express a proposition. But it strikes us as plausible that this rejection of the shopkeeper's assertion still permits the hermit to learn something from what the shopkeeper presupposes, namely that there is a pope.[7]

Cases like Two Popes remain important even once we abstract away from Strawson's particular (and controversial) views about presupposition. For these are cases in which an audience learns something new about the world from what a speaker presupposes, despite rejecting both the speaker's assertion and some of its presuppositions. They show that a speaker's presupposition can inform an audience even when her utterance fails to meet even a minimal conversational standard (namely that the audience not reject any of the utterance's presuppositions).[8] And this result goes beyond extant treatments of presuppositional testimony that permit speakers to use presuppositions to transmit knowledge (e.g., Hawthorne, 2012; Keller, 2024; Langton & West, 1999). Those accounts are concerned with the question of whether speakers can exploit presupposition to testify: to introduce information that is new to their audience, and which their audience can thereby come to know. A related recent debate explores whether we can lie with presuppositions, and whether the capacity to lie with presuppositions indicates that at least some presuppositions are also assertions (see especially Langton, 2021; Stokke, 2016, 2017, 2018; Viebahn, 2020). However, contributors to these connected debates focus on cases where either a hearer has no reason to doubt a speaker, or the hearer's reasons to doubt the

[6]Once again, nothing really hangs on adopting Strawson's account of definite descriptions: given appropriate utterances carrying multiple presuppositions, cases with the same structure as Two Popes are easy to construct. For instance, a stranger might assert "It was my daughter who robbed your house", and thereby permit me to learn that he has a daughter, even when I know that my house was not burgled.

[7]Fiction might provide another source for cases where a hearer learns from a presupposition despite regarding the speaker's (or author's) assertion as carrying false presuppositions. After all, we learn from fiction despite its being rife with assertions that carry obviously false presuppositions. Yet fictional discourse also poses special challenges for those who wish to draw more general lessons about assertion, presupposition, and testimony. See Stokke (2022) for an excellent recent discussion of presupposition in fiction.

[8]I have been careful not to say that it was the speaker's aim or intention to inform the audience with his presuppositions. As described, Two Popes involves a speaker who takes it for granted that the hearer already knows that there is a pope. However, one might easily adjust the case to introduce such an aim on the part of the speaker. For instance, the speaker might realise that the hearer has been out of circulation for a while, yet remain too polite to acknowledge that (perhaps embarrassing) fact by spelling out what would otherwise be common knowledge. In such a case, the speaker might aim to bring the hearer up to speed tacitly through presupposition.

speaker are confined to reasons which bear exclusively upon the truth of the speaker's (explicit) assertion. TWO POPES, by contrast, brings out how the phenomenon of presuppositional knowledge transfer—which I shall later argue is plausibly a form of testimonial knowledge transmission—does not generally require the presumed good standing of the assertion which carries the informative presupposition.

4 | PRESUPPOSITION'S EPISTEMIC DISTINCTIVENESS

I shall use this last result to show that presupposition provides a distinctive way for an audience to learn about the world.

In the present context, presupposition provides a distinctive way for an audience to learn about the world if an audience's entitlement to accept what is presupposed is not straightforwardly parasitic upon the good standing of a speaker's assertion. Yet treating the former as straightforwardly parasitic upon the latter is a prima facie attractive approach to explaining presupposition's epistemic significance.[9] For instance, suppose a speaker asserts "The King of the United Kingdom was born before 1950", and her audience has no reason to doubt her word. When her audience accepts that the King of the United Kingdom was born before 1950, they ordinarily incur a commitment to whatever the speaker's utterance presupposes (this is the phenomenon that Lewis, 1979 dubs "accommodation").[10] And what explains the audience's entitlement to that commitment, on the approach under consideration, is their entitlement to accept the speaker's claim that the King of the United Kingdom was born before 1950.

Cases like CENTENARIAN EMPEROR show that the approach's proponents must extend their explanatory story beyond situations in which an audience accepts what a speaker says. To help bring this revised story into view, a short detour is necessary. There exist several ways in which an audience could regard a speaker's assertion as falling short. An audience might regard an assertion as merely false, or as a non-answer to the live question, or as carrying a false presupposition, or as possessing some other defect. From amongst these, we distinguish an audience regarding an assertion as merely false, and regarding an assertion as carrying a false presupposition. Of course, many reject Strawson's proposal that when a speaker presupposes something false, her utterance fails to express a proposition. And many of them also deny that in these cases the speaker's utterance is neither true nor false.[11] Even so, anyone who accepts a distinction between what a speaker asserts and what she presupposes must accept some distinction—not necessarily captured in terms of truth and falsity—between ordinary falsity and whatever results from presupposition failure.

[9]Stalnaker (2002, p. 714) sketches an explanation of informative presupposition that falls under this general rubric. See Abbott (2008, p. 529ff) for an independent argument against the adequacy of Stalnaker's explanation as a right account of cases like CENTENARIAN EMPEROR.

[10]See Stalnaker (2014) for an account of accommodation tailored to his pragmatic account of presupposition.

[11]Dummett (1959) argues that Strawson ignores the fact that an assertion is correct when true, and incorrect when false. Given this connection between truth and assertion, presupposition failure becomes merely one more way for an assertion to be false. A theorist then can justify the introduction of presupposition only if she can find a principled reason to distinguish amongst the ways for an assertion to be false. Dummett thought this reason, if it is to be found, could come only from a semantics for complex sentences. McDowell (1979/1998) disagrees. He argues that an account of the conditions necessary for singular thought may also give rise to a divide among the ways for an assertion to be false.

Armed with this distinction, one might try to extend the target explanatory story to cases like Centenarian Emperor. The hearer in Centenarian Emperor (i.e., Simone) has reason to reject what the speaker (i.e., Thomas) has asserted. Yet her reasons leave untouched the assertion's presuppositions. Hence, the speaker's assertion retains a type of good standing within the conversation (at least from the hearer's standpoint). And this good standing may seem sufficient to explain why the speaker can accept the relevant presuppositions. Indeed, I sketched an explanation of this sort back in Section 3 when discussing how Strawson could accommodate cases like Centenarian Emperor within his account of presupposition.

Even if we can extend the approach to cases like Centenarian Emperor, we run into obvious trouble when we try to extend it to cover cases like Two Popes. In such cases, remember, an audience believes at least one of a speaker's presuppositions to be false. The speaker's assertion thus fails to meet even the minimal standard achieved by Thomas' utterance in Centenarian Emperor. And it is not at all obvious that we can isolate an appropriately lower standard that can support the extension of the explanatory story to cases like Two Popes.

By introducing this need to find an appropriate standard, Two Popes undermines the target approach.[12] And that is because cases like Two Popes bring out the extent to which the way that presupposition permits us to learn about the world is not straightforwardly parasitic upon the good standing of a speaker's assertion. I contend that this failure to be straightforwardly parasitic arises in part because—as cases like Two Popes support—presupposition possesses an epistemic profile different in kind from, and not easily subsumed by, assertion's epistemic profile. Most importantly, the failure demonstrates the distinctiveness of the way that presupposition permits an audience to learn about the world. While Two Popes provides support for my view, in the next section, I consolidate my argument by considering a pair of challenges to the distinctiveness claimed for presupposition. The first relies on examples to argue that we can learn about the world from assertions—not just their presupposition—even when the assertions are not in good standing. The second challenge seeks to explain the audience's ability to learn about the world in Two Popes in a way that sacrifices a substantive epistemic role for presupposition. Looking ahead, I eventually show that the very same resources that the second challenge tries and fails to use to explain away cases like Two Popes are (ironically) suited to explain away the first challenge's examples.

The distinctiveness I claim for presupposition goes beyond that required by those who already accept the phenomenon of informative presupposition (e.g., Garcia-Carpintero, 2016; Hawthorne, 2012; Langton, 2017; Langton & West, 1999; Sbisa, 1999). It is not simply that presupposition permits non-explicit encoding of novel information, which is a fact that speakers frequently exploit to covertly introduce new information without its being subject to the same epistemic scrutiny as explicitly introduced content (cf. Hawthorne, 2012; Langton, 2017; Sbisa, 1999). Rather, presupposition enables an act of explicit assertion to carry a message whose epistemic force survives both the known falsity of the original assertion, and the knowledge that the assertion itself carries false presuppositions.

5 | PRESUPPOSITION AS TESTIMONY

I have made a case for the view that presupposition provides a distinctive way for an audience to learn about the world. In these final sections I bolster my initial case by answering a pair of

[12]If that approach is abandoned, what explains presupposition's epistemic significance? I can offer no answer at this juncture, though cases like Two Popes pose an important challenge for any candidate explanation.

challenges, and at the same time motivate the view that when an audience learns from a speaker in this way, she thereby acquires a testimony-based belief about the world.

The audience in TWO POPES is most naturally regarded as acquiring a testimony-based belief from what the speaker presupposes. My argument is therefore indirect: I develop a response to a tempting objection (which we will see also embeds the second challenge to the epistemic distinctiveness claimed for presupposition). The objection holds that (unlike Simone in CENTENARIAN EMPEROR) the hearer in TWO POPES learns about a pope's existence not from what the speaker presupposes (and thus not through testimony), but through an independent rational reconstruction of the speaker's reasons. For example, opponents might insist that the hearer in TWO POPES tacitly reasons as follows: "What the shopkeeper says makes no sense, since there cannot be more than one pope. But he does not seem otherwise deluded, and a non-deluded man would surely not make such a claim about popes unless at least one pope is alive". If sustained, the anticipated objection also threatens to undermine my view that presupposition can provide a distinctive way for an audience to learn about the world. It threatens my view because it classifies TWO POPES as a case where a hearer learns about the world merely by interpreting a speaker's actions. Reclassifying TWO POPES in this fashion likely sacrifices a substantial epistemic role for presupposition. A hearer would not learn that p on the basis of a speaker presupposing p, but because she can make sense of the speaker's actions only by treating p as true. The tempting objection thus embeds the second challenge mentioned in the last section, since it seeks to explain the audience's ability to learn about the world in TWO POPES in a way that sacrifices a substantive epistemic role for presupposition. Answering the tempting objection—the main project of this section—will therefore also bolster my argument in the previous section for presupposition's epistemic distinctiveness.

Before responding to the objection, however, I wish to use resources introduced by the objection to answer the first challenge outlined at the end of the previous section. That challenge, recall, sought to undermine my case for the epistemic distinctiveness of presupposition by showing that there are examples where an audience can learn from assertion despite that assertion not being in good standing (i.e., the audience rejects both the original assertion and at least one of its presuppositions). Here is such a case[13]:

> POODLE: Jack tells Katherine: "Andromeda's dog, a grey poodle, was stolen by her daughter". Katherine knows that Andromeda does not have a daughter but rather a niece who is often mistaken for her daughter, and that Andromeda's dog is brown rather than grey. She also knows that while Jack often confuses grey and brown, he reliably identifies dog breeds.

I grant that Katherine can come to know from Jack that Andromeda owns a poodle, despite the fact that she knows Jack's assertion is not true and that at least one of its presuppositions is false (namely that Andromeda has a daughter). But does this threaten my view that presupposition provides a way for an audience to learn about the world that is distinct in kind from what assertion provides? No. In POODLE, and other cases like it, the audience comes to know because of exactly the sort of rational reconstruction that I shall argue *cannot* explain how the audience comes to know about the world in TWO POPES. Crucially, Katherine (the audience in POODLE) already knows that Jack is reliable about dog breeds. This is a striking and essential difference between POODLE and TWO POPES, since in the latter case the audience has no specific knowledge

[13]The example is adapted from a reviewer.

concerning the speaker's reliability about whether there is a pope. And I contend that what permits Katherine to learn the breed of Andromeda's dog, despite rejecting Jack's overall assertion and at least one of its presuppositions, is that her knowledge of Jack's reliability about dog breeds serves to circumvent the otherwise epistemically undermining features of Jack's assertion. Consider what Katherine might say to defend her new belief that Andromeda's dog is a poodle: "Yes, I know that Jack was wrong about Andromeda having a daughter, and that he frequently confuses brown and grey, but Jack is almost never wrong about a dog's breed!" By contrast, in ordinary cases of knowledge through testimony, an audience need not appeal to specific knowledge of the speaker's reliability with respect to a given question.[14] So POODLE is a case where the ordinary route to testimonial knowledge transmission is blocked by the assertion's poor epistemic standing, but the audience's special background knowledge permits her to circumvent that route (via a kind of rational reconstruction) to still learn something about the world from what the speaker says. I shall argue later in this section that the same sort of explanation does not apply in TWO POPES. POODLE thus does not threaten my argument from TWO POPES to the distinctiveness of presupposition's epistemic profile, since it is not an example of the same sort of unaided knowledge transmission as TWO POPES.

I now return to the tempting objection to my claim that the audience in TWO POPES acquires a testimony-based belief from what the speaker presupposes. A variant of the tempting objection is already familiar from the literature on testimony. Some object that presupposition ought to be classed with conversational implicature, and thus its content regarded as distinct from the content of a speaker's testimony (e.g., Fricker, 2012). However, Hawthorne (2012, p. 107) provides a compelling response to this form of the objection. He observes that linguistically triggered presuppositions (a class to which the presuppositions in TWO POPES belong) are recognised by hearers not via general Gricean maxims, but because they are "in some broad sense" part of the meaning of their triggers, and plausibly learned "as part of lexical competence".

Unfortunately, the objection from implicature that Hawthorne considers, while a general objection to accounts which permit speakers to testify with presuppositions, does not capture the full force of the original objection that targets TWO POPES. Consequently, the original objection survives Hawthorne's reply. It survives because even if presupposed content can be testified to, it is not obvious TWO POPES is such a case of testimony. The hearer in TWO POPES must rely upon pragmatic reasoning of the sort just outlined to acquire justification for believing what is in fact presupposed. Thus, while linguistically triggered presupposition may generally permit testimony—as Hawthorne argues—this does not get us out of the woods. For room still exists for an opponent to claim that cases like TWO POPES are exceptions due to the presence of known presupposition failure.

[14]This is now the second time I have presumed that testimonial knowledge transmission cannot generally require an audience to have specific knowledge of the speaker's reliability with respect to the question at issue; the assumption also played a crucial role in my treatment of the Dawn and Evelyn case in footnote 4. Yet this presumption might seem to violate my tacit neutrality with respect to a familiar and vexed debate in the epistemology of testimony between so-called "reductionists" and "non-reductionists". Reductionists insist that an audience is justified in believing what a speaker says only if they have positive (non-testimony-based) reason for taking the speaker's testimony to be reliable; non-reductionists reject this requirement. However, it should be clear that my assumption is consistent with non-reductionism and reductionism. Crucially, it is consistent with reductionist views on which a hearer's testimonial knowledge always requires positive reason for accepting a speaker's *general* testimonial reliability, rather than for accepting their *specific* testimonial reliability with respect to the question at issue. Reductionist views that demand grounds for the latter sort of reliability as a condition for testimonial knowledge are simply implausible for reasons that are independent of larger dispute between reductionism and non-reductionism.

Strawson's gnomic passage provides the beginnings of a response to the original objection. Assume that ordinary actions provide their own kind of evidence about the beliefs of agents (and, perhaps parasitically, about the way things stand in the world). Strawson takes this ordinary kind of action-based evidence to be importantly distinct from the evidence presupposition makes available. His example reveals the intended contrast. Suppose a man reaches for his raincoat. Just as we typically assume that (absent special stage setting) speakers assert what they believe to be true, we typically assume that when agents act, they do so for good reasons. As a result, given that a sensible agent reaches for a raincoat only if he thinks it is raining, our man reaching for his raincoat constitutes evidence that he takes it to be raining (and thus ordinarily evidence that it is in fact raining). In claiming that the evidence presupposition makes available is distinct in kind from the evidence provided in this example—a kind of evidence standardly made available by the actions of others—Strawson draws attention to the essentially testimonial character of the evidence presupposition provides.

Why should we apply Strawson's contrast to cases like Two Popes? The key is to reflect upon Strawson's focus on evidence for another's beliefs. His interest lies with the ways in which our actions and words reveal our inner lives. Strawson clearly regards ordinary action, presupposition, and assertion as providing successively more explicit evidence about what we believe. (A full defence of this view would obviously require a less schematic notion of "explicitness".) On Strawson's account of presupposition, speakers can use their language's semantic resources to both explicitly and implicitly communicate what they believe, and thus exploit their audience's shared grasp of a common language. Many pragmatic accounts of presupposition will also accept a version of this claim, since they allow that presuppositions frequently arise from semantic mechanisms. By contrast, an observer's interpretation of another agent's actions will not ordinarily be constrained by anything as strict as the rules of a common language. Yet it seems clear that the rules of a common language do constrain what the hearer in Two Popes can learn from the speaker, and thus that the speaker's presuppositions play a substantive role in explaining what the hearer can learn.

Let us now return to the original suggestion that the hearer in Two Popes might tacitly reason as follows: "What the shopkeeper says makes no sense, since there cannot be more than one pope. But he does not seem otherwise deluded, and a non-deluded man would surely not make such a claim about popes unless at least one pope is alive". Can such general-purpose reasoning about the speaker's reasons really explain the hearer's capacity to learn about the existence of a pope from the shopkeeper? I think not. If the shopkeeper is not a reliable source about how many popes there are, surely it would usually be reasonable for the hearer to distrust that anything the shopkeeper says (directly or indirectly) about popes makes sense. So, why is it not reasonable for the hearer to distrust the speaker in this case? What entitles the hearer to accept that there is a pope? When rehearsing the reasoning, it strikes us as relevant that the speaker does not seem otherwise deluded. Yet this fact is not a positive ground for the hearer's belief in the way that in Poodle the hearer's knowledge of the speaker's reliability about dog breeds explained the knowledge acquired. The fact instead plausibly constitutes the absence of a potential defeater for a belief formed in response to testimony. Hence, the reasoning does not explain the hearer's capacity to learn from what the shopkeeper says. It merely makes explicit some of the conditions which permit the speaker to successfully transmit knowledge via testimony (e.g., the absence of some potential defeaters). Put another way: General-purpose reasoning strikes us as a viable route for the hearer to acquire knowledge only because it is underwritten by a more basic

testimonial channel that explains the transmission of knowledge from the shopkeeper to the hearer.[15]

This last claim presumes that testimonial knowledge transmission with respect to a question (in this case, whether there is a pope) is possible even when a hearer believes that a speaker is unreliable with respect to a topic under which the question falls. Some will object that if a speaker is justifiably believed unreliable with respect to a topic, then a hearer would act unreasonably if they were to accept the speaker's testimony on a question that falls under that topic. These opponents are applying a version of the following principle:

> *Topic defeat*: B cannot come to know the answer to a question via testimonial knowledge transfer from A if B has evidence that A is unreliable with respect to a topic under which the question falls.

I shall argue that opponents cannot use this principle to press their objection without a lot more (potentially question-begging) work to restrict the principle to something defensible. In a nutshell: I show that the principle faces an analogue of reliabilism's "generality problem", and that even if this new problem admits of an answer (which is not a given), the answer may not help opponents press their objection against my argument.

To bring the problem for the principle into view, I will first say a bit more about how I understand the relationship between topics and questions. Topics are generally broader than questions, and so a topic may have many questions falling under it. A given question will also fall under many different topics. The topic of popes, for instance, includes not only questions about whether there is a pope and how many popes there are, but questions about a pope's authority, about how popes are selected, and so on. And whether there is a pope is a question that might fall under topics remote from that of popes: Someone asking the question might be interested not in the topic of popes, but (for example) in heads of state more generally. Finally, someone might be unreliable about a topic without being unreliable with respect to every question that falls under that topic.

Against this background about topics and questions, *topic defeat* (as stated) is too strong to be plausible. The principle places no restriction on which topics are such that a speaker's apparent unreliability with respect to the topic undermines her ability to transmit knowledge via testimony about a question that falls under the topic. Absent such a restriction, even paradigm cases of testimonial knowledge transmission become cases where testimonial knowledge is blocked. For instance, my colleague's claim that there is nobody else in my office is an answer to a question—namely a question about who is in the room—that falls under (amongst many other topics) the extremely broad topic of who is where. It is absurd to deny that I acquire testimonial knowledge from my colleague in this case, yet that is exactly what an unrestricted version of *topic defeat* requires, given that I have excellent reason to doubt that my colleague is reliable about where everyone in the world happens to be.

An opponent who wishes to retain a version of *topic defeat* therefore owes an account of which topics are such that a speaker's apparent unreliability with respect to them undermines a hearer's capacity to learn the answer to a topical question from what the speaker says. This is an analogue of the generality problem that reliabilism famously faces (cf. Goldman, 1979). Perhaps the present problem admits of a solution; I am sceptical that any general solution is

[15]This nicely contrasts with the earlier Poodle, since in that case the hearer's specific knowledge of the speaker's reliability worked to circumvent the clear absence of a more basic testimonial channel.

available. What matters for our purposes, however, is that it is far from obvious that a solution will generate the result that in Two Popes the audience cannot learn (via testimony) whether there is a pope (despite the audience's confidence that the speaker is unreliable about the topic of popes). Motivation for a solution will also rely on our judgements about cases like Two Popes. So an opponent wielding a restricted version of *topic defeat* is vulnerable to charges of reducing their objection to a fruitless swapping of intuitions about cases like Two Popes.

My discussion has so far operated with a rather sharp distinction between testimonial knowledge and knowledge gained from another's actions. Some might worry that this distinction is too sharp. Others will worry not about the distinction's sharpness, but about the decision to understand testimony as potentially encompassing something beyond what a speaker asserts.[16] I suspect these worries are decent ones. Yet my argument retains its force whatever our stance on the distinction between testimonial knowledge and knowledge gained from another's actions. For even without a sharp distinction, or even if one understands "testimony" narrowly to include only what a speaker asserts, an opponent might wonder whether we ought to regard cases like Two Popes as affording presupposition a substantive epistemic role, regardless of whether this substantive epistemic role counts as strictly "testimonial". At the same time, a version of Strawson's contrast would remain plausible (and relevant for our purposes). His contrast ultimately relies not upon a sharp distinction between testimonial knowledge and knowledge gained from action, but upon a distinction between cases in which an audience can exploit a language's semantic resources to acquire knowledge and those in which the audience has no such recourse.[17] And it is this latter distinction which explains what really turns on classifying the belief the audience forms in Two Popes as a testimony-based belief. The core issue is whether a speaker's presuppositions can provide a kind of "sneaky warrant" for a hearer's beliefs, or whether any presuppositional warrant instead turns out to be either parasitic upon an original assertion or underwritten by general-purpose reasoning. This sneaky warrant is a form of epistemic warrant that is neither parasitic upon assertion's good standing nor the product of general-purpose reasoning, and ought to be classed with the warrant characteristic of testimony (even if we understand testimony narrowly to exclude sneaky warrant from being a species of testimonial warrant).[18] I have argued that presuppositions can, and do, provide such "sneaky warrant". And I see no decisive reason to deny that the resulting beliefs are instances of "testimonial knowledge".

6 | THE LIMITS OF TESTIMONY

My main line of argument has not relied upon a specific positive account of the conditions necessary for testimony. Instead, I remain largely agnostic not only about the conditions necessary

[16]Compare Stokke (2018) and Viebahn (2020), who despite disagreeing about whether speakers can lie with presuppositions, agree that lying requires assertion. This leads Viebahn to defend a commitment-based conception of assertion on which presupposed content can count as asserted.

[17]Does abandonment of the sharp distinction undercut Hawthorne's argument, mentioned earlier, for treating presuppositions but not implicatures as part of testimony? No. If there is not a sharp division between testimonial knowledge (narrowly understood) and knowledge gained from others' actions, the question becomes where knowledge gained from implicature falls on the resulting spectrum. The lesson from Hawthorne's response to Fricker is that presupposition is much closer to the (narrowly understood) testimonial end of the spectrum, and implicature much closer to the other end. This result highlights the extent to which my main line of argument rests on neither a narrow nor an overly broad conception of testimony. Thanks to a referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

[18]Obviously "sneaky warrant" has been characterized almost purely negatively, but this is sufficient for my purposes.

for testimony, but about where exactly the boundary lies between testimonial knowledge and knowledge gained from another's actions.[19] This agnosticism permits me to avoid the baggage that such positive accounts carry, and allows my arguments to potentially place constraints on the development of right accounts of testimony. In this section I elucidate this agnosticism, and its virtues, by focussing on an argument developed by Keller (2024) for the view that speakers can testify with presuppositions.

Keller begins with a positive account of testimony that she borrows from Fricker—an opponent who restricts testimony to assertion—and then ingeniously argues that presuppositions in fact generally meet the conditions Fricker lays down as necessary for a speech act to count as testimony. These conditions are that: (i) the speech act be governed by a constitutive epistemic norm (specifically, a knowledge norm); (ii) a hearer has a right to complain if the content of the speech act is false; (iii) the speaker, in making the speech act, offers a guarantee that the content of the speech act is true. Fricker contends that these conditions are jointly satisfiable only by assertion, whereas Keller (building on Garcia-Carpintero, 2020) argues that they are also satisfied by presupposition.

The positive account of testimony that Keller borrows from Fricker incorporates elements accepted by a number of positive accounts of testimony.[20] As a result, if her argument goes through, then she establishes that many mainstream accounts of testimony commit their adherents to classifying presuppositions as testimony. However, I do not intend to assess the prospects of Keller's argument here. Instead, what matters is how her argument helps bring into sharp relief some important features of my main line of argument.

First, Keller's reliance upon a positive account of testimony nicely highlights the agnosticism that pervades my arguments, as well as that agnosticism's virtues. In particular, Keller's argument carries potentially burdensome commitments that my arguments do not. For instance, while her argument might be effective against those inclined to accept that testimony requires a knowledge norm governing the relevant speech act, it is famously controversial whether even assertion (let alone presupposition) is governed by such a norm.[21] By contrast, my arguments carry no such baggage: They avoid commitment to a knowledge norm or any other constitutive epistemic norm for assertion or presupposition, and so avoid such a norm from serving as a condition on testimony. Additionally, Keller's case for presupposition meeting conditions (ii) and (iii) rests in part on her case for presupposition being governed by a knowledge norm. But this connection might be exploited to generate an objection to Keller's extension of a knowledge norm to presupposition, for it is far from clear that speakers generally guarantee the truth of what they presuppose. (Indeed, perhaps speakers exploit presupposition because they wish to avoid just such a commitment!) Again, my agnosticism permits me to avoid any threat from this kind of objection.

A second but quite different limitation of arguments like Keller's concerns the import of cases like Two Popes. My main aim has been to use Two Popes to argue that presupposition possesses a distinctive epistemic profile, and so generate a constraint on a right account of how assertion, presupposition, and testimony fit together. Yet Keller's account might not even classify Two Popes as a case of testimonial knowledge. Condition (ii) offers the clearest difficulty.

[19]This boundary might also be described as that between testimonial knowledge and non-testimonial knowledge gained from another's actions. For see Nettel (2023), who defends a striking "agency-based" explanation of testimonial knowledge.

[20]For instance, Keller explicitly draws on Moran (2005), Fricker (2006), and Goldberg (2015).

[21]For an excellent overview of this debate, see Pagin and Marsili (2021).

So much has gone wrong from the hearer's point of view in Two Popes —a speaker offering an assertion that seems to carry a false presupposition—and yet he nevertheless goes ahead and accepts a presupposition carried by the speaker's assertion. Would the hearer really have a right to complain if it were to turn out that there is no pope? I suspect not.[22] An even deeper limitation also lingers. It is not possible to generate a constraint on a right account of testimony if one already assumes a specific positive account of testimony. So even if Keller's argument (or another like it) could be extended to establish that the hearer in Two Popes acquires testimonial knowledge, I could not rely on such an argument without undercutting an important aim of my project.

A final and yet crucial difference between a Keller-style argument and my own concern's scope. My argument in the previous section was for a relatively narrow conclusion, namely that the hearer in Two Popes acquires testimonial knowledge (or something that ought to be classified with testimonial knowledge) from one of the speaker's presuppositions (despite believing that another presupposition carried by the speaker's assertion is false). By contrast, Keller defends the more general conclusion that presuppositions—as a class—can be used to testify. Yet presuppositions attach to speech acts beyond assertion. Just as my friend might presuppose that there is a present king of France when he asserts "The present king of France is profligate", he might introduce the same presupposition in asking a question: "Is the present king of France profligate?" Or he might issue an (amusing) imperative: "Ensure that the present king of France is profligate!" Keller believes that these presuppositions, as much as those carried by assertions, can be used by speakers to testify. My argument does not straightforwardly generate this same result. Even if presuppositions carried by assertions can provide sneaky warrant for an audience's beliefs, nothing in my argument for that claim entails that the same holds true of presuppositions carried by other speech acts. While presupposition's epistemic significance is not straightforwardly parasitic upon assertions, this does not entail that the significance remains when other speech acts are involved. As a result, my argument (unlike Keller's) is safe from those with independent reason to deny that we can testify—or do something akin to testify—with non-assertoric speech acts. At the same time, my argument does potentially provide the foundation for a novel case in favour of extending testimonial knowledge beyond assertion.[23] For it is far from clear why only those presuppositions carried by assertion should provide sneaky warrant. Why should sneaky warrant require that the underlying presupposition be carried by an assertion? Answering this question, and thus blocking the potential case for extending testimonial knowledge beyond assertion, would require renewed clarity about the relationship between assertion, presupposition, and testimonial knowledge, given the complications introduced by cases like Two Popes.

7 | CONCLUSION

Presupposition's sneaky warrant has implications beyond the connection between assertion and testimonial knowledge: It can help explain the "stickiness" of accommodated

[22]Even though I have argued that the hearer can learn from what the speaker presupposes in Two Popes, and this is plausibly an instance of testimonial knowledge transmission, I am inclined to grant that the speaker's apparent error about the number of popes undermines what would otherwise be the hearer's right to complain if she acquires a false belief about popes by believing what the speaker presupposes. But I take this to be a strike against views like Keller's that treat the right to complain in such cases as a requirement for testimonial knowledge.

[23]Indeed, I am broadly sympathetic with those, like Keller (2024) and Viebahn (2020), who argue that speakers can testify with presuppositions even when those presuppositions are carried by non-assertoric speech acts.

presuppositions.[24] Hearers usually automatically accommodate what a speaker presupposes by adding it to the conversational common ground. What a speaker presupposes thus often acquires the status of "not at issue" content, and so remains elusive to critical scrutiny (whether it be epistemic, moral, or social). Following the lead of Langton and West (1999), this observation has become central to an important strand in feminist and social philosophy.[25] But why should the elusiveness persist even once hearers reject or block the initial assertion? Why does the accommodated presupposition not depart with the assertion? Standard answers to this question appeal to facts about the mechanism of accommodation: It is simply hard for conversational participants, especially those deemed to lack conversational authority (likely due to some form of structural injustice), to convince other participants to subject an accommodated presupposition to scrutiny. In one sense, then, presuppositions can *passively* resist critical scrutiny due to barriers raised by accommodation. Sneaky warrant adds a normative component to this standard answer, and thus brings out the extent to which presuppositions can *actively* resist critical scrutiny. A presupposition's elusiveness can persist in part because sneaky warrant does not depend on the good standing of the original assertion. As Two Popes shows, even if the assertion is shown to carry other false presuppositions, sneaky warrant can remain (by contrast, discovering that a presupposition is false would suffice undermine the warrant provided by an assertion that carries the presupposition). Hearers therefore retain (perhaps unwelcome) epistemic grounds for accepting accommodated (or soon-to-be accommodated) presuppositions. Blocking presuppositions thus requires a specific effort to defeat the associated sneaky warrant, an effort almost always more demanding than that required to undermine the original assertion.

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ORCID

Dominic Alford-Duguid https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9213-4369

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[24]I also argue for an extension of sneaky warrant to perceptual justification in Alford-Duguid (2024).

[25]See, for example, Sbisa (1999) and Langton (2017), to pick just two important examples from a large and growing literature.

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