

# Time Sensitivity and Acceptance of Testimony

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*Abstract:* Time sensitivity seems to affect our intuitive evaluation of the reasonable risk of fallibility in testimonies. All things being equal, we tend to be less demanding in accepting time sensitive testimonies as opposed to time insensitive testimonies. This paper considers this intuitive response to testimonies as a strategy of acceptance. It argues that the intuitive strategy, which takes time sensitivity into account, is epistemically superior to two adjacent strategies that do not: the undemanding strategy adopted by non-reductionists and the cautious strategy adopted by reductionists. The paper demonstrates that in adopting the intuitive strategy of acceptance, one is likely to form more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs. Also, in following the intuitive strategy, the listener will be fulfilling his epistemic duties more efficiently.

*Keywords:* Acceptance of testimony; time sensitivity; reductionism; non-reductionism.


## 1. Introduction

Testimony occupies a central place in everyone's epistemic sphere. We depend on testimony for a wide variety of beliefs, which might range from

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directions to the nearby petrol station to medical breakthroughs; from knowing the birthday of a historical figure to knowing one's own birthday.

Epistemologists seem to agree on two main points with regard to testimony: (1) testimony has immense value and is indispensable for our epistemic system; and (2) testimony is fallible since attesters can be unreliable or insincere. Accordingly, the person who is concerned with merely maximizing their knowledge through testimony is likely to be susceptible to deception. On the other hand, if one seeks to avoid recourse to testimony altogether and maintain one's epistemic autonomy, one will have an extremely limited range of knowledge that might perhaps be insufficient for basic survival.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one needs to accept, as most people do, the fact that, when incorporating testimony into one's epistemic system, the epistemic agent makes himself (to a degree) vulnerable to fallibility. This is the price paid for the knowledge that he is able to obtain. As Richard Moran states: '[M]y ultimate destination is the truth about the world, but often I must pass through the beliefs of another person as my only (fallible) access to this truth' (Moran 2006, 278). However, the price (i.e. the risk of fallibility) needs to be *reasonable*, as we do not want to end up with a large number of false beliefs. When we are presented with a testimony, we intuitively evaluate the risk of fallibility associated with it in order to reach a verdict about whether the risk of fallibility is or is not *reasonable*. Accordingly, we can decide whether or not we are willing to accept the testimony.

In this paper, I will first demonstrate how time sensitivity has an impact on our acceptance of testimony by affecting our intuitive evaluation of the *reasonable* risk of fallibility in that testimony. All things being equal, we tend to be less demanding in our acceptance of time sensitive testimonies than we are with time insensitive testimonies. I will develop this intuitive response to testimonies into a strategy of acceptance. I will then argue that what I call the intuitive strategy of acceptance is epistemically superior to

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<sup>1</sup> In making a similar point about acceptance in general, Richard Feldman states: 'We can succeed in believing lots of truths by believing everything. [...] But that hardly achieves any sort of epistemic excellence. On the other hand, by believing very little we surely manage to avoid error. But this excessive conservatism does not achieve epistemic excellence either. It is by attaining a suitable mix of the two goals that we will achieve epistemic excellence' (Feldman 1988, 244).

two adjacent strategies: the undemanding strategy adopted by non-reductionists, and the cautious strategy adopted by reductionists. I demonstrate that, in adopting the intuitive strategy of acceptance, which takes time sensitivity into account, one is likely to form more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs. Also, in following the intuitive strategy, the listener will be fulfilling his epistemic duties more efficiently.

## 2. Time sensitivity and testimony

Testimonies vary with regard to their time sensitivity. Some are bound to a tight timeframe: if one does not form a belief about the testimony within the particular timeframe, it will become epistemically valueless. Other testimonies are not time sensitive: one could delay forming the beliefs associated with them without any effect on their epistemic value to the listener. A testimony, though, could be time sensitive with respect to several considerations such as truth, justification/warrant, belief/acceptance, and probably others. In this paper, I am merely concerned with time sensitivity with respect to the truth of the testimony. To understand this point, let us consider the following example. Assume that you are late for a job interview and you get to the company's building and ask a stranger about the location of the interview. He tells you that it is taking place in the conference room and gives you directions to the place. You can either accept (or reject) the stranger's claim right away or withhold acceptance (for further investigation for instance). If you withhold your acceptance for a while, there will probably no longer be a *current* job interview. Thus, you miss the opportunity to have a belief altogether, since even if you decide to form a belief later, your belief will not be about the place of the *current* job interview; rather, it will be about something different—the place of a *past* job interview. The truth of the proposition 'the interview is taking place in the conference room' is bound to a specific timeframe (i.e., the real time of the interview). That is, outside of this timeframe, the proposition would not be true (i.e., there will not be an interview that is taking place *now* in the conference room).

In the above example, it seems that intuitively one is likely to be more lenient and accept the testimony. When we ask strangers about directions

to an office (or a gate), we tend to believe them readily. But does the element of time sensitivity have any impact on our intuitive undemanding acceptance of some testimonies? I believe the answer is affirmative. To test this hypothesis, let us compare two similar examples where the main difference between them is that one is time sensitive and the other is not:

1. A stranger identifies himself as a pediatrician to a mother and child waiting at a bus station and diagnoses the child with a non-urgent illness, prescribing a particular medicine.
2. As her child is choking and about to become unconscious, a stranger comes to the mother and identifies himself as a doctor. He tells the mother that her child needs an emergency tracheotomy and volunteers to perform it.

Let us assume that the stranger in both situations is the same person and that there are no clues that either undermine or strengthen his sincerity and reliability. All the mother has is the stranger's word. It seems that in the first example the mother would be warranted to withhold belief regarding both of the stranger's testimonies—that he is a doctor and that her child is sick and needs a particular medicine. She might bear in mind what the stranger says and decide to ask the family's GP the next time she visits, but it seems unwarranted to form a belief about her child's health based merely on a diagnosis made by a stranger.

On the other hand, in the second scenario, the mother would seem to be warranted in accepting the stranger's testimony that he is a doctor and that the child needs a critical procedure. This would be the expected and, perhaps, actual reaction of many people in a similar situation. It is quite common for people, in an emergency, to believe strangers' claims that they are doctors and to trust their claims about the situation of the ill (on airplanes, for instance).

Accordingly, the mother seems justified in both withholding belief about the first testimony and in accepting the second testimony, even though they are produced by the same person and contain fairly similar propositions. Apparently, what differentiates the two cases is the fact that, while the first testimony is fairly time insensitive, the second is very time sensitive. In the first example, the mother does not have to form a belief immediately (or

perhaps ever). She has the time, if she wishes to accept the testimony, to evaluate the sincerity and reliability of the attester. In the second case, however, the mother does not have the luxury of time to reflect carefully on the testimony and on the character of her interlocutor, as she has to accept (or reject) the testimony right away. Accordingly, even though the risk of fallibility (that the proposition is false) is fairly similar in both testimonies, the mother shows more tolerance towards the second than the first testimony. She seems to evaluate the risk of fallibility of the second (but not the first) testimony as *reasonable*. Her stance appears to be intuitively compelling. Since there was no difference between the risk of fallibility of the two testimonies, what makes the fallibility of the second testimony intuitively *reasonable* is apparently the fact that it is very time sensitive. It seems, therefore, that time sensitivity affects our intuitive evaluation of the risk of fallibility and of what is reasonable when accepting testimonies.

### 3. The intuitive strategy of acceptance

Our intuitive response to testimonies (as represented by the examples of the mother(s) and the alleged doctor) could be developed into a strategy of acceptance. This strategy assumes that one is warranted in accepting a time sensitive testimony at face value unless there are reasons that might undermine the reliability or sincerity of the attester. Further, it maintains that one is warranted in withholding one's acceptance of time insensitive testimonies unless there are positive reasons for the sincerity and reliability of the attester. I call this the intuitive strategy of acceptance.

There are two other competing strategies of acceptance. The first is the undemanding strategy that advances that our response to testimonies must be one of unchallenging acceptance. It proposes that one is justified in accepting a testimony as long as there is no reason to believe that one's interlocutor is insincere or unreliable. The second is the cautious strategy that advances that our acceptance of testimony must be conditioned. One is justified in accepting a testimony only if one possesses reasons to suggest that one's interlocutor is sincere and reliable. Advocates of the first strategy, which is typically traced back to Reid, include non-reductionists like Coady (1992), Burge (1997), and Weiner (2003), among others. Advocates of the

second strategy, which is typically traced back to Hume, include reductionists like Audi (1997), Lackey (2003), and E. Fricker (1995), among others.

Unlike the intuitive strategy, both of these strategies do not seem to consider time sensitivity a relevant factor in accepting testimonies. Apparently, in both strategies, the reasonable risk of fallibility in testimonies is fixed and remains constant across all instances of testimony. The two strategies differ, however, in their evaluation of the *reasonable* risk of fallibility in testimonies. On the one hand, the undemanding strategy seems to maintain that initially the *reasonable* risk of fallibility in testimony is identical to the risk of fallibility in testimony in general. Hence, it advocates accepting a testimony at face value unless there are positive reasons that might raise the risk of fallibility with a particular testimony (i.e. that one's interlocutor is insincere or unreliable). On the other hand, the cautious strategy seems to maintain that the risk of fallibility in testimony in general is initially higher than the *reasonable* risk of fallibility. Hence, this strategy requires positive reasons in order to reduce the risk of fallibility to the reasonable level so that the testimony might be considered acceptable (i.e. by confirming sincerity and reliability).

Besides being intuitively appealing, I maintain that the intuitive strategy is also epistemically superior to both the undemanding and cautious strategies. I provide two arguments in support of my claim.

First, the intuitive strategy has an advantage over the undemanding and cautious strategies with respect to providing more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs through testimony. To demonstrate, I will test the three strategies on all of the possible instances of testimony in relation to time sensitivity and truth and falsity, which are: (1) A testimony that is true and time sensitive; (2) a testimony that is false and time insensitive; (3) a testimony that is true and time insensitive; (4) a testimony that is false and time sensitive (see Table 1).

For the sake of simplicity, I will assume that there is no immediately available reason that undermines or supports the sincerity and reliability of the interlocutor in each of the four testimonies. However, I will assume that the sincerity and reliability of the interlocutor could be known through further investigation (which also, I assume, takes time). In addition, I will assume that the essential factor in determining the truth or

Testimony	True/False	Time Sensitivity
Testimony 1	True	Time Sensitive
Testimony 2	False	Time Insensitive
Testimony 3	True	Time Insensitive
Testimony 4	False	Time Sensitive

Table 1

falsity of a testimony is the sincerity and reliability of the attester because the probability that the testimony is true is high if the attester is sincere and reliable and is low if he is not. I am aware that it is possible, however, that a testimony could be true even if the attester were neither sincere nor reliable, or false even if he were both sincere and reliable. Since the probabilities of such occurrences are quite low, I will omit them in my analysis below for the sake of simplicity.

Given the above, let us move to test the three strategies. In adopting the intuitive strategy of acceptance in handling the testimonies in table 1, with everything being equal, I will end up with three true beliefs and one false belief. Following this strategy, I will accept testimony number one at face value since it is time sensitive, and from this will follow a true belief. Since it is time insensitive, I will inquire about the sincerity and reliability of the attester when I am presented with testimony number two. This should suggest that the testimony is false and hence will lead to another true belief. The same goes with testimony number three, except here I will realize that the testimony contains a true proposition. Finally, since it is time sensitive, I will accept testimony number four without further investigation, which will result in a false belief. Accordingly, following the intuitive strategy leads me to three true beliefs and one false belief.

In adopting the undemanding strategy, however, I will end up with two true beliefs and two false beliefs. Since there is nothing that would undermine the sincerity and reliability of the attesters, I will accept all four testimonies at face value without further investigation, regardless of their time sensitivity.

Finally, in adopting the cautious strategy, I will end up with two true beliefs only. Since there is no available information that strengthens the

sincerity and reliability of the attester, I will investigate their sincerity and reliability in all four instances. Accordingly, I will form true beliefs about the time insensitive testimonies, but will fail to form beliefs about the time sensitive ones.

In examining the results of following these strategies, one should notice that the intuitive strategy is indeed epistemically superior. While we will gain at best two true beliefs following the other two strategies, we will form three true beliefs following the intuitive strategy. Between the two other strategies, however, the cautious strategy seems to be preferable since it will result in its follower forming two true beliefs and no false beliefs. This can be compared to the undemanding strategy, which adopts an overly tolerant approach that will lead to its follower forming two false beliefs and two true beliefs.

The second reason for adopting the intuitive strategy is that, in following it, we are better fulfilling our epistemic duties than if we followed either the undemanding or the cautious strategies. Fulfilling epistemic duties means that, in forming a belief, the agent exhausts the available means and sources to attain truth and avoid error. When a testimony is time sensitive and there is nothing that undermines the sincerity and reliability of the attester, the word of the attester is usually the only source available to the listener. Further, when a testimony is time insensitive, there are usually other means and sources available to the listener through which he could determine the sincerity and reliability of his interlocutor. Therefore, by depending on the words of the attester—which are the only source available to the listener in a time sensitive testimony—the listener is exhausting all of the available means, and thus he is fulfilling his epistemic duty. On the other hand, by enquiring further about the sincerity and reliability of his attester in time insensitive testimony, the listener, then (and only then), exhausts the available sources and means. Only the intuitive strategy yokes these two modes together.

In following the undemanding strategy, however, the epistemic agent would fail to fulfill his epistemic duties in certain instances. To demonstrate, let us go back to the time insensitive example of the mother and the stranger who claims that her child is sick. In that example, the character of the attester is opaque. The undemanding strategy would encourage the mother



to believe the stranger right away even if there are means available to enquire about his sincerity and reliability. This seems problematic; to appreciate this, let us assume that the mother knows that the stranger is a friend of her cousin Sally, whom she is just about to meet. Yet, she chooses to believe the stranger's claims at face value without consulting her cousin at all. Apparently, by doing so the mother would not be fulfilling her epistemic duties efficiently as this option would make her unnecessarily vulnerable to error. All things being equal, the mother as an epistemic agent should do what is better for attaining truth and avoiding error. Since the situation is not time sensitive, what is better for attaining truth and avoiding error is clearly the one where she enquires about the sincerity and reliability of the attester. The vulnerability to fallibility in testimonies is something one cannot avoid altogether, but at the same time it is something that one should not go through without a good reason. Therefore, on certain occasions, the undemanding strategy fails to enable the listener to fulfill his epistemic duties.

On the other hand, the cautious strategy seems to ask too much of the listener and in adopting it the listener might, in some instances, also fail to fulfill his epistemic duty to accept a testimony. To understand this point, let us re-examine the example of the time sensitive testimony of the alleged doctor and the choking child. According to the cautious strategy, the mother is not justified in accepting the claims of the stranger until she investigates his sincerity and reliability. This requirement seems problematic. Since the testimony is time sensitive, by accepting the words of the stranger, the mother seems to exhaust all of the available means and sources to justify her acceptance. Anything beyond what is available to the mother should not be part of her epistemic duty, and in that instance, investigating the sincerity and reliability of the stranger is beyond her available sources. If she investigates the sincerity and reliability of the stranger, the child will probably die in the process and the stranger's testimony that 'I can save the child' will become void. Indeed, not accepting the testimony while exhausting all the available justifications for it is failing to fulfill one's epistemic duty to accept a relevant proposition. Hence, the cautious strategy also fails to provide a means of maintaining the listener's epistemic duties.

In comparing the three competing strategies, one should notice that the intuitive strategy appears favorable as it helps the listener to fulfill his epistemic duty more efficiently than either the undemanding or the cautious strategies.

#### 4. Potential objections to the intuitive strategy of acceptance

There are two potential objections to the intuitive strategy of acceptance. The first targets the concept of time sensitivity upon which I based the intuitive strategy. The second targets my argument for the intuitive strategy in which I argued that the strategy has an advantage over the undemanding and cautious strategies with respect to providing more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs through testimony.

First, one might object that time sensitivity is a relative concept. There is no clear distinction between a time sensitive testimony and a time insensitive testimony. On the other hand, however, the intuitive strategy seems to assume a clear distinction between the two and it seems to be based upon that distinction. Since the distinction is indeed unclear, the intuitive strategy is useless.

This objection, however, is not compelling. The distinction between time sensitive and time insensitive testimony is only unclear if one considers time sensitivity unconditionally, which is not the case with the intuitive strategy. In fact, the time sensitivity/insensitivity of testimony is considered *with respect to the relevant instance in which the testimony is presented*. With time sensitivity being conditioned in this manner, the distinction between time sensitive and time insensitive testimony becomes clear. Accordingly, the question one should ask is whether or not one can investigate the reliability and sincerity of the attester further without the testimony losing its value *with respect to the instance in which the testimony is presented*. If the answer to that question is affirmative then the testimony is time insensitive, and if the answer is negative then the testimony is time sensitive. To illustrate, let us reexamine the alleged doctor examples introduced above. In the first example,

1. A stranger identifies himself as a pediatrician to a mother and child waiting at a bus station and diagnoses the child with a non-urgent illness, prescribing a particular medicine.

In this example, we notice that the mother has the time to investigate further the reliability and sincerity of the attester. She has time to do so *with respect to the instance itself*. The truth of the testimony should not change while the mother investigates further. The testimony, therefore, is time insensitive.

Things are different with the second example:

2. As her child is choking and about to become unconscious, a stranger comes to the mother and identifies himself as a doctor. He tells the mother that her child needs an emergency tracheotomy and volunteers to perform it.

In this example, we notice that the truth of the testimony would probably change if the mother investigates the reliability and sincerity of the attester further since the child might die, for instance. The mother does not have time to investigate further *with respect to the instance itself*. Since the mother cannot investigate further without rendering the testimony valueless, this testimony, therefore, is time sensitive. Notice that apart from the instance itself, some parts of the testimony can be considered time insensitive, such as the attester's testimony that he is a doctor. This sense of time sensitivity is, however, irrelevant to my proposition. Therefore, the first objection fails. There is indeed a clear distinction between time sensitive and time insensitive testimony if the concepts were conditioned to the instance where the testimony is presented and are considered with respect to the truth of the testimony in particular.

The second objection might be offered to my argument for the intuitive strategy, in which I postulated that the intuitive strategy has an advantage over the undemanding and cautious strategies with respect to providing more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs. One might object that my argument presupposes an equal distribution of true and false testimony across time sensitive and time insensitive testimony while this might not be the case. Namely, it might be that, in reality, there are, for example, far more false time sensitive testimonies than true time sensitive testimonies. Therefore,

in practice, the strategy would not help one in obtaining more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs as it is claimed.

This objection, however, is based on a misunderstanding of the superiority of the intuitive strategy defended above. There are two ways to represent my argument for the intuitive strategy. In this objection, it seems to be represented as follows:

- (1) A testimony comes in four forms: a true time sensitive testimony; a true time insensitive testimony; a false time sensitive testimony; and a false time insensitive testimony.
- (2) All instances of testimony in the real world distribute evenly among the four forms above.
- (3) Following the intuitive strategy will lead one to obtain true beliefs through testimony three out of four times.
- (4) Following the undemanding or the cautious strategies will lead one to obtain true beliefs two out of four times.

Therefore, following the intuitive strategy leads one to have more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs through testimony.

If one understands my argument as such, then it is obvious that premise two is incorrect and, hence, the argument is unsound. This, however, is a misrepresentation of the argument. The argument should read as follows:

- (1) A testimony comes in four forms: a true time sensitive testimony; a true time insensitive testimony; a false time sensitive testimony; and a false time insensitive testimony.
- (2) External factors determine how instances of testimony in the real world distribute among the four forms.
- (3) Isolated from external factors, instances of testimony should distribute evenly among the four forms.
- (4) Isolated from external factors, the intuitive strategy will lead one to obtain true beliefs through testimony three out of four times.
- (5) Isolated from external factors, the undemanding or the cautious strategies will lead one to obtain true beliefs two out of four times.
- (6) Hence, isolated from external factors, the intuitive strategy leads one to have more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs through testimony.

Therefore, the intuitive strategy has an *inherent* advantage over the undemanding and cautious strategies with respect to providing more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs.

However, the question might arise as to what justifies isolating external factors of testimony in premises 3–5 in my argument above.

External factors (i.e., the actual contexts in which testimony is given) vary significantly and perhaps, when taking these into account, there will not be a single, unconditional, advantageous strategy. Different contexts will require different strategies of acceptance. For instance, knowing that stand-up comedians tend to lie in their stories to enhance the humor, we would perhaps be wise to adopt the demanding strategy when accepting their testimony. In addition, knowing that doctors are reliable and tend to tell the truth when discussing the results of tests with patients, the undemanding strategy would appear to be the most advantageous strategy to adopt in such instances. No doubt, this is practically helpful. However, when taking external factors into consideration, we will recognize, if we are successful, which strategy is better *relative* to a specific context. This, however, is irrelevant to my argument. The aim of my argument is to establish that the intuitive strategy is internally, or in theory, relatively advantageous in providing more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs. This advantage cannot be examined unless we isolate testimony from external factors. I am aware, though, that this *internal* advantage might be overpowered or cancelled out by external factors in actual contexts. It is an advantage nonetheless. Hence, the second objection is irrelevant.

Finally, it might be worthwhile noting that the intuitive strategy is concerned principally with achieving more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs. In some cases, however, getting things right might not be essential (as in the case of the stand-up comedian's stories mentioned previously). The intuitive strategy seems to be unhelpful in such cases. Yet, this should not be a disadvantage for the strategy for two reasons. First, the primary aim of any strategy of acceptance (indeed, the primary epistemic aim *simpliciter*) is to obtain true beliefs and avoid false beliefs. This is also the main epistemic duty required by epistemic agents. Other advantages, if they are relevant (like differentiating between significant and less significant testimony), should be secondary to the primary epistemic aim. Secondary

advantages could always be supplemented by other tools. As long as the strategy does not obstruct the secondary advantages, there seems to be nothing objectionable about it.

The second and more important reason is that while judging the truth of testimony is something absolutely objective, determining the significance of the testimony could be widely subjective and relative to a particular listener (or a group of listeners). What is important to one person might be trivial to another. It should not be a disadvantage of any strategy if it fails to account for the relative and various personal preferences of listeners.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended the intuitive strategy of acceptance which, unlike competing strategies, takes into account the time sensitivity of the testimony. I have argued that the intuitive strategy is epistemically superior to the adjacent strategies of acceptance: the undemanding strategy and the cautious strategy. One is likely to obtain more true beliefs and fewer false beliefs in adopting the intuitive strategy. Additionally, in following the intuitive strategy, one fulfills one's epistemic duties more efficiently than would be the case with either of the two other strategies.

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