

Commentary on CREDIBILITY AND COMMITMENT IN THE MAKING OF TRULY ASTONISHING FIRST-PERSON REPORTS

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1. ORDINARY CASES

There is a good deal that is admirable in this paper. In particular, there is the general account of when testimony can function as legitimate evidence in ordinary cases. Fields maintains “the Assurance View of Testimony,” which seems to be correct in holding that one cannot determine whether testimony is credible simply by considering “the subject matter of the testimonial assertion” or simply by monitoring the speaker “for signs of insincerity or incompetence,” though the Assurance View does hold that a requirement of legitimate testimony is the speaker’s “pledge to speak truthfully.” Instead, the Assurance View proposes that “what distinguishes a credible from a dubious testimonial source is the undertaking on the part of the speaker or writer of an open commitment to stand by what she or he has said” (5). The paper nicely explains and presents some argument for this view.

Nevertheless, it seems that this cannot be the whole story. I think what is missing is some kind of requirement to the effect that the testifier *is in a position to know* what he or she claims, or at least is in a position to have significant evidence that it is true. You might sincerely testify that p , not be in any position to know or have significant evidence that p , and yet still be fully willing to stand by what you have claimed. For example, you might be stubbornly or obstinately guessing, speculating, or betting that p . Or you might not realize that you are not in a position to know that p —for instance, a claim about what time it is—having fallen asleep and lost track of the time. Such hardly seems to be credible testimony.

At this point, one might wonder about the kinds of questions that we usually have about testimony as it is commonly conceived, especially expert testimony. Here is a partial list from Doug Walton (2008: 246): “How credible (knowledgeable) is E as an expert source? . . . Is E an expert in the field that [proposition] A is in? . . . Is E personally reliable as a source—for example, is E biased? . . . Is A consistent with what other experts assert?” But I take it that this is not Fields’ intended sense of ‘testimony’. Rather, I take that Fields is tackling the spectacularly pared-down question, as Jonathan Adler puts it, “*What reason, if any, is there for a hearer to just take the speaker’s word?*” Adler goes on to explain as follows:

Zenker, F. (ed.). *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of the 9th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA)*, May 18-21, 2011. Windsor, ON (CD ROM), pp. 1-4.

In order to focus on this fundamental problem, a good deal of abstraction is required. . . First, speakers' contributions should be limited to brief assertions to avoid internal support due to coherence among the set of assertions. Second, corroboration or convergence of a number of testifiers, who are presumed independent, should be set aside. Third, testimony is to be the sustaining, not just the originating, source of the corresponding belief. . . Fourth, we set aside cases of a hearer's attribution of expertise to a speaker on certain topics, as well as a speaker's acting under professional or institutional demands for accurate testimony. . . Fifth, and most obvious, the hearer has no special knowledge about the speaker—the speaker is a *stranger* to the hearer. (Adler 2006: 3)

Adler adds to this list the assumptions that the speaker is sincere and speaking literally (4). He recognizes that these specifications of the bare-bones situation of testimony are idealized, particularly the fifth, since it is hardly ever the case that the hearer has no special knowledge about the speaker (3). So one focuses on cases that are as close as possible to the idealized situation: the “*core cases*,” which Fields (5) and Adler seem to agree consist of “simple informational exchanges over *easily know matters*” (my emphasis), “e.g., the time, the weather, driving directions. . . sports scores, the whereabouts of acquaintances, explaining your action” (Adler 2006: 4).

Even given this exquisite specification of the intended kind of case, it still seems to me that in order to have credible testimony, the testifier must be in a position to know what he or she claims, or at least be in a position to have significant evidence that it is true. I think that this requirement is reflected in Adler's “Default Rule” for cases of bare testimony: “If the speaker S asserts that p to the hearer H, under normal conditions, then it is proper or correct for H to accept S's assertion, unless H has special reason to object” (2006: 5). The special reason to object could be that you (S) are not in a position to know that p —what time it is—since you fell asleep. But for Fields' stated view, the only kind of special reason to object would be S's lack of a commitment to stand by what she or he has said. (Adler's example of a special reason to object is where the driving directions are “very complex” and conflict with H's “own judgment of plausibility.”)

2. EXTRAORDINARY CASES

Let us now turn from ordinary to extraordinary cases of bare testimony. Fields distinguishes two kinds—“astonishing” and “truly astonishing.” His primary example of an astonishing first-person report is of having an experience of an extraterrestrial or alien being. His only example of truly astonishing report is of having an experience of God. The critical difference between astonishing and truly astonishing reports for Fields is that the former “are about natural, though unusual objects and states of affairs,” whereas the latter are about the “supernatural” (9–10). Fields seems to see quite well that the likelihood of there being special reasons to object to such reports is directly proportional to how astonishing they are. So, after the bare, astonishing testimony involving “an open commitment” on the part of the testifier “to stand by what she or he has said,” things can become considerably less bare. As compared to ordinary cases, Fields says there should be “a much more explicit taking of responsibility on the part of S, with an exceedingly generous level of questioning and cross-examination being encouraged and allowed” (9). Not only might there be such interrogation, there might also be a kind of independent checking and fact-finding. Fields says that for astonishing reports, it is at least possible that “those that are questioning their makers will be able to look into and corroborate

some of the answer that they [*sic*] latter give. There can be evidence left behind by aliens” (9–10). Of course now we are more than drifting into kinds of evidence other than testimony. But the key point is that such independent corroborative evidence is, seemingly by definition, not available in the *supernatural*, truly astonishing, God-case. Fields himself emphasizes this—indicating that here there is a ‘metaphysical absolute elusiveness’ (10)—so what does he offer instead for his central case of a report of having an experience of God?

I think the paper is weakest in its brief attempt to answer this question. What can this “honest testifier” do to legitimately convince recipients? Fields answers: firmly exhibit a “commitment to rational investigation,” with special attention to ways that experience may be distorted or beliefs mal-formed, such as where bias leads to misinterpreting “data” or selectively attending to or gathering “evidence” (10–11).

I think I can see the applicability of this, for example, where one is generating a statistical report or graph—which of course are notoriously subject to manipulative bias—but I have no clear idea of what it means for a report of having an experience of God. How could *data* ever even be relevant? The fundamental problem seems to be formulated well by Wallace Matson (1965: 19): “It looks then as if an experience, to be evidence for the existence of a god, must be indescribable; but an indescribable experience cannot be evidence for anything; therefore no experience can be evidence for the existence of a god.” Fields seems to fully agree with Matson’s first premise (given the ‘metaphysical absolute elusiveness’ of purported experiences of God) and with his second premise (given the “commitment to rational investigation”), so why doesn’t Fields agree with Matson’s conclusion? He clearly does not agree with Matson’s conclusion, for Fields says that the point of his paper is to show “how reports of apparent experiences of God could be used as a form of evidence or justification for the claim that God exists” (3).

Maybe the reason Fields doesn’t agree with Matson’s conclusion goes back to Adler’s “Default Rule” for cases of bare testimony: “If the speaker S asserts that *p* to the hearer H, under normal conditions, then it is proper or correct for H to accept S’s assertion, unless H has special reason to object.” Maybe Fields thinks that ultimately somehow there are not special reasons to object to a report of having an experience of God, even though this hardly seems consistent with his apparently holding (as above) that the likelihood of there being special reasons to object to astonishing and truly astonishing reports is directly proportional to how astonishing they are. At one point near the beginning of the paper, Fields seems to be saying that he will be *assuming* that there are not special reasons to object to a report of having an experience of God *for the sake of argument* (2). (What argument? A question-begging argument?) Yet at another point, speaking of alien or extraterrestrial beings and God, he says positively that “so far as I know, there is no such thing as a knock-down, drag-out argument against the existence of such entities or of the possibility of people encountering them” (8). Aside from this being a puzzling expression—isn’t it the case that if an argument is “knock-down” it is not “drag-out,” and if it is “drag-out” it is not “knock-down”?—one wonders about arguments such as the argument from the existence of pain and evil. Or about arguments that the concept of God is a self-contradictory concept, perhaps infinitely self-contradictory, for example: no being can be both omniscient and immutable since to

know what time it is, is to have *changing* knowledge (e.g., Kretzmann 1966; Grim 1985). Such arguments certainly purport to be “knock-down.”

Finally, Fields claims that “astonishing—and indeed truly astonishing—first-person experiential reports are an inveterate feature of the indispensable practice of persuading others of the truth of putatively factual claims based on one’s knowledge or experience” (3; note that this seems to require that the testifier be in a position to know what he or she claims). I don’t see this. As compared to ordinary reports, astonishing and truly astonishing reports seem to be more of a sideshow than an inveterate feature. It seems that extraordinary reports have a tendency to be dispensable in proportion to how astonishing they are.

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