

## **TRANSMITTING FAITH (AND GARBAGE)**

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**Abstract.** Part I of the paper argues against evidentialism and individualism in religious epistemology, and in favor of a “social turn” in the field. The idea here is that human belief in general, and religious belief in particular, is largely characterized by epistemic dependence on other persons. An adequate epistemology, it is argued, ought to recognize and account for social epistemic dependence. Part II considers a problem that becomes salient when we make such a turn. In short, how are we to understand the transmission of knowledge and rational faith in a religious tradition? The problem arises because, by all accounts, even the best traditions transmit superstitions, self-serving prejudices, and other things that are down right false on any reasonable view. So how is it that these same traditions can also transmit rational faith and even knowledge by means of the very same channels, for example channels of religious authority and religious teaching? Part III offers a tentative solution to this problem.

### **I. A SOCIAL TURN IN RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY?**

Evidentialism in epistemology is the thesis that the epistemic standing of one’s belief (as justified, as reasonable, as rational, as knowledge) is entirely a function of one’s relevant evidence. Understood this way, evidentialism is a strong thesis. The idea is that the facts about evidential grounding *exhaust* the facts about epistemic status. Alternatively, the facts about epistemic status supervene on the facts about evidential grounding.<sup>1</sup> Evidentialism understood this way is also an individualist thesis. The idea is that the facts about the epistemic standing of an individual believer are exhausted by the facts about that same individual.<sup>2</sup>

The guiding model for evidentialism is that of properly inferring a conclusion from the premises of a good argument. Evidence plays the functional role of premises in an argument, and evidential grounding plays the functional role of inference. The model applies most smoothly to justification and knowledge that is grounded in reasoning, but evidentialists apply the model more broadly. For example, perception is conceived as grounded in experiential evidence, and perceptual beliefs about physical objects are conceived as being inferred from experience.

Contemporary religious epistemology has largely worked within this evidentialist framework. For example, great attention has been devoted to arguments for God’s existence, including updated versions of traditional arguments from natural theology, as well as updated design arguments invoking recent empirical findings from biology and cosmology.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, great attention is devoted to arguments *against*

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1 For a more detailed characterization of evidentialism in epistemology, see chapter four of John Greco, *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (CUP, 2010). See also Earl B. Conee and Richard Feldman, eds., *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Clarendon Press, 2004).

2 See Sanford Goldberg, *Anti-Individualism: Mind and Language, Knowledge and Justification* (CUP, 2007); and Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard, “Robust Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Anti-individualism”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (2012).

3 For example, see William L. Craig and James P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

God's existence, including new, probabilistic arguments from evil.<sup>4</sup> Working within this framework, the task of religious epistemology is to put the various evidence for and against God's existence on the table, and then to sort it all out. The epistemic status of religious belief then depends on the balance of the evidence.

More recently, there has been an anti-evidentialist turn in general epistemology, and in religious epistemology as well. The main idea is this: Not all knowledge (justified belief, reasonable belief, rational belief) is supported by reasons or grounds acting as evidence. Put differently, not all cognitive processing is like reasoning from an argument. That is, not even all *epistemically good* cognitive processing is like reasoning from an argument. For example, perception plausibly is not like this. Neither is memory. On this alternative view, the human mind is fitted with a variety of cognitive faculties or modules, allowing access to some relevant domain of reality, but each working in its own way to do so. This new model is more in line with contemporary cognitive science, which sees the human mind as modular, with different modules dedicated to specific cognitive tasks, and involving cognitive processing designed to address the specific task in question.<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary cognitive science, then, does not try to fit all cognition into the “reasoning box”, and the trend in contemporary epistemology is to follow suit in this respect. This has had fruitful results. For example, consider traditional skeptical arguments that trade on the idea that there is no good inference from sensory appearance to mind-independent, physical objects. The evidentialist model tends to accept this way of framing the problem, and hence looks to provide the good inference. The anti-evidentialist model can agree that there is no inference from sensory appearances to mind-independent reality, but also insist that none is needed. That is, it is now open to insist that perception does give us epistemic access to the mind-independent world, but that perception does not involve inference in doing so.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this does not show that we do have knowledge of mind-independent perceptual objects, but it does effectively reject one important line of skeptical reasoning, and moves us off one problematic line of response. A similar dialectic can be reconstructed regarding our knowledge of other minds, as well as our knowledge of the past.

In the 1980s we saw a similar anti-evidentialist turn in religious epistemology. For example, William P. Alston argued for a model of religious perception based on a broader, reliabilist approach to physical object perception.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Alvin Plantinga defended a proper function approach in religious epistemology, consistent with a broader epistemology that posited a variety of properly functioning cognitive faculties.<sup>8</sup> A common theme of both authors was the anti-evidentialism that we saw above: Not all good cognition is like reasoning from evidence, like having a good argument. Rather, human beings are fitted with a variety of truth-reliable, properly functioning cognitive capacities.<sup>9</sup>

Even more recently, there has been a strong “social turn” in general epistemology.<sup>10</sup> The main idea is this: Not all knowledge (justified belief, reasonable belief, rational belief) is the product of the individual believer's cognizing alone. Rather, there are important social dimensions of knowledge and other epistemic standings, and recognition of these is necessary to account for the full range and extent of human knowledge and the like. Put differently, human cognition is shot through with social epistemic dependence, or epistemic dependence on other persons. In this respect, human beings are social animals in the cognitive domain as much as they are in the practical domain.

4 For example, see William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1979); and Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1996).

5 See Greco, *Achieving Knowledge*.

6 I defend this line of argument in detail in John Greco, *Putting Sceptics in Their Place: The Nature of Skeptical Arguments and Their Role in Philosophical Inquiry* (CUP, 2000).

7 William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

8 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (OUP, 2000).

9 In this and other respects, Alston's and Plantinga's epistemologies have an affinity with contemporary virtue epistemology, for example Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Vol. 1* (OUP, 2007); and Greco, *Achieving Knowledge*.

10 For example, see Alvin I. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Clarendon Press, 1999); and Alvin I. Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb, *Social epistemology: Essential readings* (OUP, 2011).

Of central importance here is the role of testimony in our cognitive lives. It is now widely agreed that our dependence on others for their testimony is ubiquitous, and that any adequate epistemology must recognize and account for this.<sup>11</sup> For example, the typical person would know very little about history, science or current events if not for the testimony of others. A proper appreciation of the role of caregivers, teachers, history books, news reports, and the like, make it clear that in fact most of our knowledge is testimonial knowledge. Accordingly, an adequate epistemology must include an adequate epistemology of testimony, and the latter must accommodate the breath and depth of our epistemic dependence on others.

I would like to recommend a similar social turn for religious epistemology. Just as religious epistemology has fruitfully followed general epistemology in making an anti-evidentialist turn, it is now time to follow with a social turn as well. This is especially plausible with regard to the Abrahamic faiths, in which the role of testimony is clearly central. For example, consider in these traditions the importance of scripture, the role of prophets, and the centrality of religious authority, as well as the importance of the personal testimony of individual believers. This all suggests that an adequate epistemology of religious belief must be a social epistemology, i.e. one that takes seriously our social epistemic dependence on others in the religious realm.

To further this argument, I want to briefly consider one application to a familiar problem in religious epistemology. I do so not to convince, but rather to show how a social turn in religious epistemology can change a familiar conversation. Before proceeding, however, it will be necessary to review an important theme in social epistemology: the distinction between knowledge generation and knowledge transmission.<sup>12</sup>

The distinction between knowledge generation and knowledge transmission, in the way that I want to draw it, depends on the prior notion of an epistemic community, defined as a collection of individuals cooperating with respect to some information-dependent task or set of tasks.<sup>13</sup> One example of an epistemic community, in this sense, is a business corporation comprised of people cooperating to produce some product or provide some service for the purpose of making a profit. Another example of an epistemic community is a scientific research team, comprised of a people cooperating to discover a cure for some disease. But epistemic communities can also be smaller and/or more fleeting than this. For example, a family is an epistemic community in the present sense, as are two people who are trying to find a restaurant together. What we need is cooperation with respect to some information-dependent task or set of tasks.

We may note that epistemic communities so understood are faced with two epistemic tasks: that of *producing* (or generating) knowledge, justified belief, etc. relevant to their practical tasks, and that of *distributing* (or transmitting) that knowledge, justified belief, etc. An example of a generating source would be perception: a person who is well-placed perceptually can act so as to generate community-relevant knowledge. Once acquired, this knowledge can then be transmitted to others in the group via testimony, or perhaps some other means of transmission. For example, a member of a hunting party might acquire knowledge that prey is off in some direction, and then communicate that relevant information to other members of the party via words or hand signals.

An important question in the epistemology of testimony regards whether the transmission of knowledge (justified belief, etc.) is reducible to the generation of knowledge (justified belief, etc.). Reductionists in the epistemology of testimony think that it is. Specifically, they tend to think of transmission as back-to-back cases of generation — first knowledge is generated in some person by means of, for example,

11 For example, see C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A philosophical study* (Clarendon, 1992); and Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, *Social epistemology* (OUP, 2010).

12 For example, see Michael Welbourne, “The Transmission of Knowledge”, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 114 (1979); John Greco, “Recent Work on Testimonial Knowledge”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2012); and John Greco, “What is Transmission\*?”, *Episteme* 13, no. 4 (2016).

13 See John Greco, “Testimonial Knowledge and the Flow of Information”, in *Epistemic Evaluation: Purposeful Epistemology*, ed. David K. Henderson and John Greco (OUP, 2015); and Greco, “What is Transmission\*?”.

perception, and then knowledge is generated in a second person by means of testimony. This second generation takes place by means of evidence about the competence and sincerity of the speaker. That is, testimonial knowledge is understood as a kind of inductive knowledge, where the hearer's inductive evidence is directed at the past behavior of the speaker, or perhaps human speakers more generally.

Anti-reductionists reject this broad picture of testimonial knowledge and justification, arguing instead that the transmission of knowledge (justified belief, etc.) is a distinctive phenomenon, requiring its own epistemological treatment. I will defend an anti-reductionist approach below, but for now it is sufficient to note the substantive disagreement between reductionists and anti-reductionists about testimonial knowledge and justification: Reductionists think that the transmission of knowledge and justification is nothing special — it merely involves inductive knowledge and justification on the part of the hearer. Anti-reductionists think that the transmission of knowledge and justification cannot be understood this way, but rather involves a distinctive and irreducible phenomenon.

With this much in place, we have enough to take a fresh look at several problems in the epistemology of religious belief.<sup>14</sup> Here I focus on David Hume's discussion of miracles.

Hume argued that it is never reasonable to believe on the basis of testimonial evidence that a miracle has occurred.<sup>15</sup> There has been much debate about how Hume's argument is supposed to go, but here is one reconstruction. First, suppose we are presented with testimony that some apparent miracle has occurred — let's say that someone has turned water to wine. According to Hume, reasonableness requires that we weigh this testimonial evidence against whatever other evidence we have that the event in question did not occur. That is the first premise of the argument. But since the event in question is an apparent miracle, that guarantees that our evidence against its occurring will be very good indeed. Here is the argument for that: If the event in question appears to be a miracle, then it must conflict with an apparent law of nature. But nothing could appear to be a law of nature unless we have very good evidence for it — unless we have *excellent* evidence for it, in fact. That is the second premise: that our evidence against the apparent miracle occurring will always be excellent.

Finally, Hume's third premise is that our evidence in favor of the event's occurring will always be less than excellent. That is because we already know that people often testify falsely about purported miracles occurring. Sometimes people lie, or are self-deceived, or just make a mistake. In any case, the track record is not very good. And in light of that track record, the testimonial evidence for the present case is not very good either. But now all Hume's premises are in place: Our testimonial evidence that an apparent miracle has occurred will never be as good as our evidence that it has not occurred. And this means we can never reasonably believe, on the basis of testimonial evidence, that a miracle really has occurred.

It is plausible, however, that Hume's argument depends on a reductionist understanding of testimonial evidence. Specifically, he seems to be thinking that beliefs formed on the basis of testimony are subject to the same norms or standards as beliefs based on inductive reasoning. That is why he can say that our testimonial evidence that some miracle has occurred will always be inferior to our evidence that it has not — in comparing the evidence, he thinks he is comparing apples to apples. If an anti-reductionist account of generation and transmission is right, however, then it is no longer clear that our testimonial evidence in favor of a miracle's occurring must always be inferior to our inductive evidence against it. That will depend on the over-all quality of the testimonial transaction, constituted by a) the quality of the original source (perhaps the miracle was eye-witnessed by many) and b) the quality of the testimonial transmission between the original sources and those receiving the testimony.

14 Elsewhere I consider several problems involving religious disagreement, including the problem of divine hiddenness, the problem of peer disagreement, and problems involving competing testimonial traditions. See "John Greco, 'Religious Knowledge in the Context of Conflicting Testimony'", *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 83, no. 83 (2009); John Greco, "Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony", in *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, ed. Dariusz Łukasiewicz and Roger Pouivet (Ontos Verlag, 2012); and John Greco, "No-Fault Atheism", in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief*, ed. Adam Green and Eleonore Stump (CUP, 2015).

15 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (OUP, 2007), Section 10.



Put differently, an anti-reductionism about testimonial transmission will be concerned with more than the inductive evidence available to the hearer. On the contrary, it will look at the epistemically relevant characteristics of the testimonial exchange, including relevant social relations between speaker and hearer, and other relevant features of the epistemic community. Different theories of transmission will offer different details about what the relevant relations and features are, and how those manage to underwrite a successful transmission of knowledge or justification. The present point is that, whatever these are, they will not be exhausted by the facts about the hearer's inductive evidence. If anti-reductionism is right, then Hume is comparing apples to oranges, and therefore his general approach to the question is misguided.

## II. THE GARBAGE PROBLEM

A social turn in epistemology makes use of the notion of epistemic community, and of the idea that epistemic communities can sometimes transmit knowledge (justification, rational belief, etc.) among their community members. Different theories will disagree about just how this happens, but everyone should agree that it *does* happen. For example, everyone should agree that parents sometimes transmit knowledge to their children, teachers sometimes transmit knowledge to their students, and doctors sometimes transmit knowledge to their patients, and all by means of testimonial exchanges that plausibly are designed to do just that job. That seems clear in the case of epistemic communities generally, but now we might apply the same idea in religious epistemology. That is, we might plausibly assume that there are religious epistemic communities, and that these too are characterized by social relations and other features that allow the transmission of knowledge, justified belief, etc.

Two problems immediately suggest themselves regarding this application, however. The first is that knowledge and the like cannot be transmitted if no one has these in the first place. That is, one reason one might deny that religious communities can transmit religious knowledge (justification, etc.) is because one thinks that no such thing exists to be transmitted. I am going to put aside that worry for the purposes of this paper. That is, I will assume that religious knowledge, or at least justified belief or rational belief, can be generated by some means or another, and will restrict discussion to whether epistemic goods can be transmitted by religious communities, once generated. A second worry that one might have — and this is the worry I will focus on — is that religious communities cannot transmit knowledge and justified belief *even when it is generated in some of its members*. The worry is that, even if religious knowledge and/or justified belief can be generated in some individuals, religious communities lack what it takes to transmit those epistemic goods to other members in the community who lack them.

The worry arises because, by all accounts, religious traditions transmit a lot of garbage. That is, even if we admit that the *generation* of religious knowledge (justified belief, reasonable belief, rational belief) is possible, it seems that there can be no *transmitting* that knowledge (justified belief, reasonable belief, rational belief) to others, because religious communities transmit garbage *right along side* any good stuff. For example, even the best traditions also transmit mere superstitions, self-serving prejudices, and other things that are down right false on any reasonable view. Put differently, even if a few “experts” can have religious knowledge (justified belief, reasonable belief, rational belief), those epistemic goods can't be transmitted to the non-experts. Let's call this “the Garbage Problem for Religious Belief”.

The first thing to note here is that this is not *only* a problem for religious belief. On the contrary, the problem generalizes. That is because, more generally, knowledge seems to be transmitted right alongside garbage. For example, parents often transmit groundless prejudice to their children, teachers often transmit cultural myths to their students, and doctors often transmit pseudo-science to their patients. And this happens at the same time, we would like to think, that they are transmitting knowledge. Call this “the garbage problem in general”: How is it that knowledge can be transmitted right alongside garbage in general? Or better: How can we theorize transmission, so as to explain how knowledge can be transmitted right alongside garbage?

It is important to note that the problem is not avoided by evidentialism about testimonial knowledge and justification. That is, we don't avoid the problem by saying that, in the good case (knowledge), the hearer has good evidence of speaker competence and sincerity, whereas in the bad case (garbage) she does not. That is because evidence of competence and sincerity, even when we have it, is often not so fine-grained— i.e. not so fine-grained as to separate the knowledge and justified belief from the garbage. For example, in the typical case a child will have only *general* evidence regarding the competence and sincerity of a parent— she will not have evidence that mom is sincere and competent regarding this one thing but not this other. The same for students with respect to their teachers, and for patients with respect to their doctors, or at least often that will be so in cases where we want to attribute knowledge and justification.

Here is a more extended example to make the point. Consider a culture that accepts a spirit theory of disease. Such a culture will nevertheless enjoy a fair amount of knowledge regarding the symptoms of different illnesses, which diseases are contagious, prognoses for recovery, etc. All of this knowledge can be gained by observation and induction, despite being embedded in bad explanatory theory. But now consider members of the culture who have not made the observations or done the reasoning for themselves. That is, consider those members of the culture who are relying only on the testimony of those who do know. Presumably, these laypersons can come to know (now through the testimony of experts) such things as that *this person is sick, this person is contagious, and this person's prognosis is poor*. The problem is, testimony to this effect will be right alongside testimony that *this person is possessed by a bad spirit, this kind of spirit easily jumps from one body to the next, this kind of spirit kills you*.

We can give other examples as well. A few years ago, laypersons knew from the testimony of experts that *eggs contain cholesterol*. But we were also told (and we believed) that *eating eggs raises cholesterol levels in the blood, that higher cholesterol levels increase the risk of heart disease, and that therefore eating eggs increases the risk of heart disease*. It turns out that all these other things we were told are garbage.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, I submit, we laypersons knew, even back then, that eggs contain cholesterol, and we knew this from the testimony of experts.

And now the point is this: Even if laypersons often have good evidence regarding the competence and sincerity of experts, that evidence will often not be so fine-grained as to sift knowledge from garbage. More generally, hearers often do not have that kind of evidence regarding their speakers. And yet knowledge manages to get transmitted anyway. Somehow, parents still manage to transmit knowledge to their children, teachers to their students, doctors to their patients, etc. The garbage problem, then, is a problem for any non-skeptical position: How can this happen? How does it work? *How is it that knowledge can be transmitted right alongside garbage?*

To be clear, we have a fairly easy explanation regarding how the *experts* can know some things while not knowing others — they have well established inductive evidence for various facts and correlations, but insufficient evidence for their incorrect theories. Our problem concerns the *non-experts*. How is it that *they* can be transmitted knowledge and justification via testimony from the experts, even when those epistemic goods come alongside garbage, and even when they can't tell the difference? The non-experts *don't* have the required evidence to discriminate knowledge from garbage, and so can't do the job even if they were *ideal* in their evaluation of the evidence.

<sup>16</sup> “Chicken eggs are high in cholesterol, but the effect of egg consumption on blood cholesterol is minimal . . . The risk of heart disease may be more closely tied to the foods that accompany the eggs in a traditional American breakfast — such as the sodium in the bacon, sausages and ham, and the saturated fat or oils with trans fats used to fry the eggs and the hash browns”. F. Lopez-Jimenez, M.D., “Are Chicken Eggs Good or Bad for my Cholesterol?”, Mayo Clinic 2015. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/high-blood-cholesterol/expert-answers/cholesterol/faq-20058468>. “Analysis of the available epidemiological and clinical data indicates that for the general population, dietary cholesterol makes no significant contribution to atherosclerosis and risk of cardiovascular disease”, Donald J. McNamara, “Dietary Cholesterol and Atherosclerosis”, *Biochimica Et Biophysica Acta (Bba)-Molecular And Cell Biology Of Lipids* 1529, no. 1 (2000).

### III. A PROPOSAL FOR SOLVING THE GARBAGE PROBLEM

My strategy in what follows will be to suggest a solution for the garbage problem in general, and then suggest a way for applying that solution to the garbage problem for religious belief. Both suggestions will be tentative. Whether either works in the end, I expect, will depend on details that go beyond the scope of the present paper.

#### *a. The garbage problem in general*

My general strategy is to treat the garbage problem as a generality problem.<sup>17</sup> The key to solving the problem, I will argue, is to properly conceive the parameters of transmission channels, including the range of content that a particular channel can transmit. To get the idea, it will be helpful to take a look at a generality problem for perception.

Plausibly, our perceptual faculties generate knowledge only if they deliver perceptual truths reliably. And it is natural to think that they often do. Thus, it is natural to think that visual perception delivers a high percentage of truths about physical objects. Here is the problem: That natural idea is right only if we are thinking about the relevant parameters in the right way. Presumably, we are thinking of good lighting conditions, a direct view of the object, an object that is not too small, etc. If we play with these various parameters, we can easily arrive at the result that our visual perception is not reliable. For example, it is not reliable at identifying very small objects in poor lighting conditions. More specifically, the problem is this: How do we set the relevant parameters in the right way? That is, in a way that a) is theoretically principled (e.g. not ad hoc, not question-begging), and b) gives the right results regarding what we can and cannot know by visual perception.

We may now see an analogous problem for transmission channels. Plausibly, testimonial channels transmit knowledge only if they do so reliably. But it is natural to think that often they do not. Thus, it is natural to think that testimony often transmits garbage right alongside knowledge. That is the garbage problem. The current suggestion is that we need to conceive of transmission channels and the information they transmit more narrowly. For example, doctors *are* reliable testifiers about well-known, highly common symptoms of highly common diseases. If we think of transmission channels in that way, then they do transmit information reliably. But the problem is as before: How do we set the relevant parameters in the right way? That is, in a way that a) is theoretically principled (e.g. not ad hoc, not question-begging), and b) gives the right results regarding what we can and cannot know by transmission.

That is the strategy in outline. The more specific proposal is that relevant parameters are set by relevant practical concerns. More exactly, the idea is that knowledge attributions are always made from a conversational context, and conversational contexts always pick out a practical environment, defined by some set of relevant tasks. The current proposal is that these practical tasks determine the relevant parameters of transmission channels.

To develop the proposal, return to the notion of an epistemic community, and the idea that epistemic communities are tasked with acquiring and distributing relevant information. In this sense, each epistemic community will have an “economy of information”. Moreover, in a well-functioning epistemic community, the flow of information will be governed by appropriate norms or standards. What is needed is *quality* information, and a well-functioning community will have norms or standards to insure appropriate quality.

Plausibly, different epistemic communities will have different norms or standards, depending on the relevant tasks at hand. For example, different communities will have different norms or standards for determining when perceptual information is good enough for the task at hand. And this will plausibly include the parameters regarding the conditions and scope of adequate perception. For example, if our practical task is to find the restaurant, it won't matter if lighting on the street is not optimal or if a street

17 E. Conee and R. Feldman, “The Generality Problem for Reliabilism”, *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 89, no. 1 (1998).

sign is partly obscured by a shadow. So long as perception is “good enough for practical purposes”, it will be perfectly appropriate to make perceptual observations under such conditions. But suppose our practical task is to build a bridge, and that requires observing whether a concrete piling has cracks in its foundation. Or suppose the task is to track the progress of a disease, and that requires observing whether a rash on the patient’s skin has become better or worse. Now the lighting had better be excellent, and partially obscured surfaces will not do. In these cases, what counts as adequate perception will be defined by very different parameters.

Similar points can be made regarding the “scope” or “range” of perception. Suppose that Pete is looking at the bridge’s cement pilings from about twenty feet and in normal daylight. If our task is to paint the cement pilings, and we need to know whether there are cracks that first need repairing for that purpose, Pete’s visual perception is perfectly adequate to the task — if there are cracks in the piling that matter for our purposes, Pete will easily see them, and reliably so. But if we are safety engineers and our task is to determine the soundness of the cement, then Pete’s perception is not adequate to the task. There might be cracks in the piling that matter for our purposes, but that Pete will not reliably see. For example, there might be cracks that are internal to the pilings, and that Pete’s vision cannot detect. Put in terms of scope: the scope of Pete’s reliable perception is adequate for the first task but inadequate for the second. Put differently, the range of information over which Pete’s visual perception is reliable is adequate for the first task but inadequate for the second.

These latest remarks are regarding the norms or standards for information *acquisition* — they concern the norms or standards for acquiring information in the first place. But now we can say the same thing about the *distribution* of information within an epistemic community: Each community will have norms or standards for judging when a testimonial exchange is good enough for the task at hand. And here again, the parameters regarding the conditions and scope of adequate testimony will be set by relevant practical concerns.

To see the point with regard to scope, we need only consider Pete in the role of informant.<sup>18</sup> For purposes of painting the bridge pilings, Pete is a perfectly reliable informant. That is, over the range of information relevant to painting the bridge, Pete’s testimony will be perfectly reliable. But for purposes of engineering safety, Pete is an inadequately reliable informant. That is, over the range of information relevant to bridge safety, Pete’s testimony will not be very reliable at all. It’s not that Pete is insincere — its that he does not have the perceptual competence to see all the cracks that are relevant to the bridge safety task.

We can make the same point by exploiting ranges of sincerity rather than ranges of competence. For some practical tasks, a speaker will be reliable across a range of relevant information because she is sincere and competent over that range. But that same speaker might be insincere over a different range of information, and so an unreliable testifier over that range. If different tasks require reliability over these different ranges of information, she will be a reliable testifier relative to one task and an unreliable testifier relative to the other.

All of this is in support of the current proposal: that relevant practical tasks determine the relevant parameters of transmission channels. This is our proposal for setting the parameters in a way that is a) theoretically principled, and b) gives the right results regarding what we can and cannot know by transmission.

By way of elaboration, suppose that you are in your doctor’s office to see about how you should treat a medical condition, and suppose your doctor is perfectly knowledgeable about this kind of condition and how to treat it. That is, suppose your doctor is highly reliable within this range of information. But suppose that during your visit your doctor starts spouting off some ridiculous political views, together with various misconceptions that support those views. Clearly, your doctor is not very reliable within this second range of information — she is spouting garbage. The present idea is that this does not matter for the purposes of your visit — you came in to get information about how to treat your medical condition, and your doctor *is* highly reliable in that regard. More exactly, the combination of a) your contributions

18 Here we assume that Pete’s only source of information about the bridge pilings is visual perception under present conditions.



as a hearer, b) your doctor's contributions as a speaker, and c) broader social conditions, all combine to create a highly reliable transmission channel between you, within the range of information that matters.

Similar points can be made regarding the other cases we have considered. Thus, for practical purposes requiring information about symptoms, how different diseases progress, which diseases are contagious, etc., our doctors in the spirit culture are reliable testifiers, participating in reliable exchanges with their patients. Since this is the kind of information that matters for their patient's purposes, the doctors manage to transmit knowledge to them. For other purposes, such as *explaining the causes* of symptoms, the spirit culture doctors are unreliable. But that doesn't matter for relevant practical purposes, and so that garbage does not get in the way — the knowledge still flows.

Of course, we can imagine different practical concerns, with different ranges of relevant information. Our speakers might be unreliable in those different ranges, and if so would fail to transmit knowledge in those ranges, even when they know.

Likewise, we imagine cases where it is unclear what the relevant practical concerns are, or otherwise unclear what the relevant parameters of a transmission channel should be. But that is just to say that we have not given a fully specified answer to the generality problem. And perhaps it is unreasonable to look for a detailed principle here, i.e. a principle that could be used to determine relevant parameters in every case. For one, things are plausibly too messy for that — we just don't have the requisite grasp of the myriad contextual features that go into setting the parameters. That is not to say that epistemologists should say *nothing at all* about the various features and mechanisms responsible for setting relevant levels of generality. On the contrary, we should try to be as informative as we can on this point, and here and elsewhere I have tried to fill in the details to some degree.<sup>19</sup> The point, rather, is that we should not expect that these details can be clearly and exhaustively specified, and certainly not that they can be codified into principles that will pronounce on every case.

The present suggestion, then, is that we have said enough to make substantial progress on the garbage problem. First, we have defended a general strategy — that of treating the garbage problem as a generality problem. According to this general strategy, transmission channels must be conceived, in part, in terms of relevant ranges of information. For example, exchanges between doctors and patients should be evaluated for reliability with regard to medical information. Second, we have filled in at least some of the details regarding how informational range (and other relevant parameters) of transmission channels are set. In short, conversational contexts pick out relevant practical tasks, and these practical tasks determine relevant ranges of information. For example, the practical tasks associated with a doctor's visit (at least typically!) carry informational needs regarding medical diagnoses, medical treatments, etc., but not regarding politics, sporting events, etc. That's why a conversation with your doctor can transmit knowledge about a diagnosis, even if it comes with a lot of garbage about politics.

#### *b. The garbage problem for religious belief*

Religious communities are epistemic communities in the sense defined above. That is, they are collections of individuals cooperating with respect to a set of information-dependent tasks. Moreover, religious communities are characterized by various relations that seem designed to transmit relevant beliefs within the community. Thus, religious communities are typically characterized by various relations of interpersonal trust. Such communities are also typically characterized by various social norms and institutional structures designed to mark doctrine and specify authority. As before, let us also assume that some religious communities include religious knowledge and/or rational faith among at least some of its members. The present question, then, is whether the transmission of knowledge and faith runs afoul of the garbage problem for religious belief.

On the present suggestion, that will depend on the proper way to conceive the parameters of transmission channels in religious communities. And that, in turn, will depend on the relevant practical tasks

<sup>19</sup> For example, see John Greco, "What's Wrong with Contextualism?", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58, no. 232 (2008); and John Greco, "A (Different) Virtue Epistemology", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 1 (2012).

of such communities. In other words, we need to ask what religious faith and knowledge are for. That is clearly a question that cannot be adequately settled within the space of this paper. Nevertheless, we can make some suggestions which, if correct, would point toward a solution for the garbage problem for religious belief.

A number of philosophers and theologians have noted that “faith has behavioral, affective, and cognitive features to it”<sup>20</sup> And in fact, at least some of these authors argue, the affective and behavioral features are more important than the cognitive. This comes out when we ask “What is faith for?” In many religious traditions, and certain in all of the Abrahamic traditions, faith is to be understood primarily in relation to salvation, or, in other words, in relation to reconciliation with God. But for that purpose, Kvanvig argues, how you act and how your affections (your attachments and commitments) are oriented is more important than what you believe. And, of course, some beliefs will be more important than others.

So what is faith for? More exactly, what is the cognitive content of faith for? On the present suggestion, it is what you need to know (or believe) to achieve reconciliation with God. The idea, then, is this: Transmission channels in a religious community might reliably distribute that kind of information, even if they also transmit a lot of garbage along with it. The garbage falls outside the scope of what is made relevant by the practical context.

On the present suggestion, the practical task associated with religious faith is to create, maintain, and live in community with each other. Thus a religion teaches: “This is how we live”; “These are our ways”. Included in this task is to create, maintain, and live in community with God. Thus a religion teaches: “This is who God is for us”; “This is our history with God”; “This is how we love God, this is how God loves us”. The idea is that all of this might be transmitted reliably, even if with a lot of garbage as well. The garbage is irrelevant to the practical task at hand, and so does not undermine the transmission of relevant knowledge (justified belief, rational faith).

Of course, fine points of theology might be absolutely relevant in a different practical context. For example, they might be relevant in the context of inter-religious dialogue, or in debates with atheists. But these practical contexts will set different parameters, and will issue in different norms and standards for what counts as knowledge, reasonable belief, etc. The point is that this does not undermine what goes on in the practical life of a religious community, which might very well enjoy a smooth transmission of the kind of knowledge and faith that is relevant for its own, internal purposes.

We might consider the Catholic Church as a model here. Here we have a stark example of a) social and institutional structures that are set up to reliably transmit teachings of the faith, b) how some of those teachings are considered more central than others, and c) how they are treated as such. Thus the Church recognizes various levels of centrality for its doctrine, and one might think that these are, or should be, arranged according to their importance in the life of the Church and community with God.

Some further consequences of this approach follow straightforwardly. First, it is possible that different traditions, with conflicting theologies, both manage to transmit the practical knowledge required for personal salvation, i.e. community with others and community with God. Second, it is possible for such practical knowledge to be transmitted in the mist of theological confusion, superstition, and outright error in other matters. Third, religious traditions are not exceptional in this regard. The same is true of medical traditions, scientific traditions, and more besides, as our examples in Part One make clear. So there is no special pleading here for religious knowledge and religious belief.

Finally, our approach, if correct, would vindicate a social turn in religious epistemology, and a turn away from the evidentialism and individualism of the past. Evidential resources are thin in the religious domain, as are any one individual’s resources more generally. If we are to account for the full scope of

20 Jonathan L. Kvanvig, “What is Fundamental to Faith?” unpublished manuscript.

religious knowledge and rational faith, we do well to recognize the *social*-epistemic resources of religious communities and traditions.<sup>21</sup>

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