KNOWING, TELLING, TRUSTING[1]
RICHARD HOLTON

Some years ago Katherine Hawley sent me a characteristically generous email, commenting on a paper that I had written on trust back in 1994. She didn't agree with all of what I said there—far from it—but she wanted to pick up on some ideas that she did like, and talk about what was complementary, and what different, in what she was doing. I hope I can here capture some of that generous spirit, to continue the conversation, if sadly one-sidedly, and to demonstrate, in ways that will be clear to those who know her writings, how much I have learned from her work and how much I have been stimulated by it. My aim is to bring together two topics on which she wrote: one concerning knowing-*how*, and *wh*-constructions more generally (Hawley 2003, 2010); the other concerning trust.[2] In both cases my interest, following her lead, is to see how they tie in with issues around telling and testimony.

The paper falls into three parts. The first looks at *wh*-constructions, focussing on the so-called *factual whs*, 'where', 'when', 'who', 'what', rather than the *explanatory* 'how' and 'why'. I look at the form these constructions take, and at what this might say about the states, and the practices, that they are used to report. The second part moves to the particular case of telling-*wh*: to constructions such as telling someone where the swallows nest, or who is at the door. This construction brings a very particular set of requirements: requirements not just to tell the truth, but to tell *all* the relevant truths and nothing but. The third section explores what might be gained by focussing an account of trust and testimony on the telling-*wh* construction so understood, rather than on the blander idea of assertion.

To fix bearings, I'll start with the familiar case of knowledge-*wh*, which will form something of an ongoing backdrop to the discussion. And a word on methodology: I'll be making inferences from our linguistic usage to the things that that usage is about. That is an approach with a somewhat chequered past; after all, our language may be misleading about how things actually stand. I'll aim to buttress it with some other considerations, especially from developmental psychology. But the linguistic considerations do a lot of work. My defence is that for social subject matters like the ones I'm pursuing here, where the phenomena are not entirely independent of how we take them to be, what we say has more authority than it might have elsewhere. I hope it will provide, in Austin's phrase, a useful first word, if not the last.

Most of the discussion of knowledge in analytic philosophy has taken, as its paradigm, states that are naturally described using ascriptions with *that*-complements:

Johann knew that life could only be understood backwards.

This is not surprising, since most of the discussion has tied knowledge to belief, and such constructions readily correspond with belief ascriptions:

Johann believed that life could only be understood backwards.

But English, and other natural languages, employ a number of different knowledge constructions. One which has received a fair amount of philosophical interest, thanks to Ryle and to those who have questioned his account, is knowledge-*how*:

Frida knew how to paint.

Again though, knowledge-*how* is just one instance, and perhaps not a terribly representative one, of a broad class of knowledge-*wh* constructions:

Johann knew *where* the lemon trees bloomed;
Dominic knows *who* was at the party;
Clarissa had know *when* the flowers would be delivered;
Boris never knew *what* hit him.[3]

'Knows' can thus take either a *that*-complement, or a *wh*-clause.[4] Here it is unlike 'believes' or 'thinks', both of which take *that*-complements, but neither of which can take a *wh*-complement:

*Johann believed where the lemon tress grow
*Dominic thinks who was at the party

Once again though, this is just part of much wider pattern. There are a class of verbs, like 'believe' and 'think', that can only take a *that*-complement to characterize the content of the attitude; there is a class that, like 'know', can take either a *that*-

---

[3] I leave 'whether' out of consideration, since it has many quirks that mark it as an outlier: it can't be used to ask a question, and, most centrally for my purposes, it does take a sentential complement, and so works much more like 'that' than the other *wh* terms. For the classic discussion see (Karttunen 1977); for a recent summary (Roelofsen 2019a). An alternative, course, taken in (Égre 2008) does take 'whether' as the paradigm. That results in a very different picture.

[4] I leave aside various other constructions, most markedly those with a simple nominal object: 'Harriet Beecher Stowe knew Mark Twain'. Since these translate into many languages using a different form altogether, we might infer that this is really a different verb even in English.

complement or a *wh*-clause; and then there is a class that can only take a *wh*-clause. Following standard linguistic practice, call these the anti-rogative, responsive, and rogative verbs respectively (Lahiri 2002). In summary:

Anti-rogative verbs take a *that*-complement, but not a *wh*-clause
        e.g. think; believe; hope; worry; fear; claim; assert.[5]

Responsive verbs take both a *that*-complement and a *wh*-clause
        e.g. know; realize; discover; show; tell; be certain.

Rogative verbs; take a *wh*-clause, but not a *that*-complement
        e.g. wonder; ask; investigate.

How should we make sense of these patterns? Two obvious routes beckon. We could think of *wh*-clauses as being fundamentally very similar to *that*-complements, and think of the Responsive verbs as thus being the normal cases.[6] The Rogative and Anti-Rogative would then get explained as the anomalies, failing to take the complements they do because of certain selectional restrictions. Alternatively we could think of *wh*-clauses as being fundamentally different to *that*-complements. Rogative and Anti-Rogative verbs would then count as the normal cases, and we would have to explain why the Responsive verbs take both.

Each of these approaches have their defenders among linguists; no one has yet provided a completely adequate and elegant theory using either approach, and I am not going to try to adjudicate here.[7] Ultimately questions of whether *wh*-clauses are similar to *that*-complements, understood as a linguistic issue, will have to be anchored in a much wider linguistic theory about the nature of the various constraints, what needs to be explained, what does and what does not count as an elegant or economical explanation, and so on. These may be very particular to linguistics, perhaps ignoring issues about psychology or about the social use of the constructions, so this is certainly not a topic to be broached here.[8]

Among philosophers the concern has been rather different. Here the main question has been: among the responsive verbs, is either the *that*-form or the *wh*-form, the

---

[5] 'Believe', though not 'think' can of course also take a nominal — 'Harriet Beecher Stowe believed Mark Twain' — but this doesn't serve to characterize the content of the belief.

[6] Often on this approach one of the two sorts of complement is given fundamental status. Standardly this is the *that*-clause; *wh*-clauses are then analyzed in terms of them. Or, more accurately, *wh*-ascriptions are analyzed in terms of *that*-ascriptions. (For the classic presentation of such an approach see (Karttunen 1977), (Groenendijk &Stokhof 1984); and for a more recent version, (Klinedinst &Rothschild 2011). Opposition to this will be discussed below.

[7] For an excellent summary see (Roelofsen 2019b).

[8] For the general issue of the potential independence of linguistic theory from the psychology of the agents who speak, see (Soames 2009).

more fundamental? And here there has been much more agreement. The orthodoxy has been that there is reducibility, and that it is the *that*-form that is fundamental.[9]

My focus will be rather different again. Although issues of reducibility will keep recurring (to come clean: I'm inclined to be sceptical of it) I am interested in these linguistic uses primarily as an indication of how people think and act. In particular, I'm interested in what light they can shed on our practice of telling, as well as on our folk theory of that practice. Obviously these are distinct, and they will come apart radically if the folk theory of telling is wrong. But in the absence of evidence to think that we are wrong, understanding how we theorize about telling gives us some evidence about what telling is.

My initial focus will be on the factives, all of which (with the possible exception of 'regret') seem to be responsive. 'Know' is thus characteristic of a whole class of factive verbs in taking both *wh*-clauses and *that*-complements. *Wh*-clauses (with the exception of 'whether') clearly contain a *question*; no one disagrees about that. And in the case of factives, the standard way of construing them is relative to an *answer* to a question:

> If you know who is at the door, you know the answer the question 'Who is at the door?'.[10]

But what is the answer to the *wh*-question corresponding to a factive? It is standardly held to be, at the linguistic level, a sentence, and, at the referential, a proposition. So the answer to the question 'Who is at the door' is: 'George is at the door'. The reduction of knows-*wh* to knows-*that* is then understood as progressing through the thought that the subject who knows *who* is at the door, knows-*that* George is at the door.

But as a piece of English, that is somewhat odd. Pedantic school teachers, especially those teaching foreign languages, often insist on full sentence answers. But that is just to make work for their students (and perhaps to make marking easier). A more likely ordinary language reply to the question of who is at the door is with what Krifka (2001) calls a *term answer*: simply 'George'; or, if a full sentence, 'It's George', with a pleonastic 'it'.

Not all *wh*-questions work in this way. 'Why' and 'how' ask for explanations, but 'when', 'which', 'where' and 'what' pattern much like 'who', in that they can be answered with noun or quantifier phrases (though their full sentence answers don't

---

[9] See, for instance (Higginbotham 1996). There are some dissenters, e.g. George (2013), Farcas (2016).

[10] The rogatives seem, in contrast, to raise a question: If you wonder who is at the door, you wonder about the answer to the question: 'Who is at the door?' The non-factive responsives like 'guess' are a bit harder to characterize. We seem to have two possibilities: it might be 'Correctly guess the answer to the question…' (akin to a factive); or 'Make a guess as to the answer to the question…'. But those do seem to correspond to two different readings of 'guess'. In French that distinction is plausibly marked with two different words 'prédire' and 'deviner'. See (Spector and Égre, 2015).

always use a pleonastic 'it'). Following Michelle Chouinard (2017:17), I'll call them the *factual wh*-expressions, in contrast to the *explanatory wh*-expressions, 'why' and 'how'.[11] According to Chouinard the factual *wh*-expressions form a class: they are the ones that children start using first, before the age of around 30 months (Chouinard, 2007: 30–3; Harris 2012: 30–2). I think it is worth investigating whether we can take seriously the idea that, at the linguistic level, the answer to the question 'Who is at the door' is provided by a noun or a quantifier phrase; and at the referential level, by an object, broadly construed to include places, times etc.[12] So if we stick with the thought that someone who knows who is at the door knows the answer to that question, then the object of their knowledge would be, not a fact, but an object.[13]

This might sound rather strange. What is it to know an object? The claim might suggest some kind of acquaintance relation: something like that expressed by 'connaitre' in French, or 'kennen' in German. Clearly there are knowledge ascriptions in English that have this form. You might know your friends, or a city, in this way. A similar phenomenon occurs with other verbs, perhaps with some cases of showing. A colleague shows you her new car. The relatum here is just the car, and now that she has shown you, you are acquainted with it. But the use of knows-*wh* is different.

I'll build up to this via some further verbs. First, 'wants'. The dog wants the ball. She has seen it in your hand, and now she jumps up on her hind legs in front of you, panting, lunging towards it; you throw it and she tears off, catching it in her mouth as it bounces. The baby wants the toy. She has seen on the table, out of reach, and she points, and cries, and looks expectantly at those around her. Handed it, she grabs it and grins. These look like desires for objects, and we naturally report them as such. Commenting on such cases, Lloyd Humberstone (1990) argues though that there is always something more involved. While we might say simply that we want a beer, there is always something more to our desire: we want to drink it, to own it, or whatever. The dog wants to play with the ball; it doesn't want to eat it. Likewise for the child with the toy. It is not clear that either the dog or the child represent things to themselves in this way; their explicit focus is simpler, and is plausibly entirely on the object. But there is something about their their behavioral dispositions, and hence their minds, that adds the further specificity, something we can see from the outside, even though this may not be immediately present to them.

Someone asks 'Which cake do you want?' You show them by pointing. Unlike the case of the car, this is a showing-*wh*. You show which cake you want by your gesture. Your response was perhaps a little rude, but you have answered their question. We can reconstruct a sentence from your response, either combined with

---

[11] Note that, combined with other elements, 'how' can also be used as a factual *wh-expression*: 'How many cakes are there' etc.

[12] And in the case of 'what' construed even more broadly: 'What did Hilary think?' etc.

[13] This might make it slightly misleading to label them as the 'factual *wh*-expressions', since I'm suggesting that the reference is an object; but the usage is established, and I don't want to beg the question by labelling them 'objectual *wh*-expressions'.

your gesture—'I want the cake that I'm pointing at'—or without it—'I want the third cake from the left in the back row'. But why think that what you have done is basically provided a sentence of either of these forms, rather than simply indicated an object? You provided an answer, and the answer was given by the cake itself.

The reason not to rest content with just the object is that we need the question to understand the sense of the answer. You might have pointed at the cake for any number of reasons: from delight, from surprise, to indicate the one you don't want. The pointing has the force it has when understood as the answer to the question you were asked: 'Which cake do you want?' And, explicitly or implicitly, there might be a lot more put into the question than simply what you want: 'Which cake do you want to eat now, which to save for later?' and so on.

So show-*wh* can be understood in terms of the question and the answer taken as a pair, where the answer is understood as denoting an object. We can also understand wanting in a similar way, even if the subject is in no position to grasp the associated question: 'What does the dog want to play with?' — 'That ball'. The dog's focus may be on the ball, but our focus is on the combination of that with a question that we have posed, which together make sense of the dog's behaviour.

The same account, I suggest, can be given of knowing-*who*. In the cases that we have looked at, the knower is in a position to articulate the question, but that doesn't have to be the case. The very young child, hearing a new voice from the kitchen, beams and says 'Dada!' They may be in no position to understand the explicit question 'Who is in the kitchen?' or even 'Who is that?', but they nonetheless know who is there. We supply the question in the case where they cannot.[14]

Other philosophers, notably Jonathan Schaffer, have argued that we should understand *wh*-questions in terms of a question-answer pair. Schaffer makes use of different, though compatible, considerations to those used here. He comes to a different conclusion, understanding the answers in terms of sentences or propositions. This, in turn enables him to give a reductive account of knowledge-*that* ascriptions in terms of knowledge-*wh*. My reason for wanting to understand the answers as simple objects comes partly from the linguistic concerns voiced so

---

[14] I abstract here from the other, often quite complex, things that we might be after when we ask 'Who is that?' For discussion see (Boër and Lycan 1986). In such cases I suspect that the answer will still naturally be given with a noun phrase or a quantifier phrase, but I will not try to substantiate that claim.

far; but they are inconclusive on their own.[15] More substantial arguments come, I think, from considerations about child development: both in terms of the knowledge ascriptions that they make, and in the objects of those ascriptions.

For many years it was the orthodoxy that children did not have a theory of mind below the age of around four. The primary evidence for this was their failure in the 'false belief' task: trying to ascertain whether young children could assign false beliefs to others. These findings have recently been challenged, and there is nothing like consensus. But right from the start it was clear that children who supposedly found it hard to ascribe false beliefs, could nonetheless ascribe states of desire and of knowledge.

In a stimulating recent piece looking at the second of these abilities, Harris, Yang and Cui (2017) analysed the use of the term 'know' by two American children, Adam and Sarah, whose childhood conversations had been recorded by Roger Brown in the 1960s.[16] Harris *et al.* examined the transcripts of their conversations between the ages of 27 and 36 months. They found that both of the children were using the term fairly regularly, and doing so in a way that clearly indicated understanding. So for instance, from Adam we get:

> I know this piece go (in answer to 'Where does this piece go?', 30m);
> know what dey eat (31m);
> I don't know his name (35m);
> I don't know where caboose is (35m).

Sarah was keener on denying knowledge than affirming it, normally when responding to adults' *wh*-questions. But again, as Harris *et al.* point out, this is done with clear understanding:

> What happened to the strings? I no know (30m);
> Who drives the bus? No know (32m);
> Where's your daddy? I don't know (33m).

And there are some affirmations from Sarah, though typically with an acquaintance (i.e. connaitre-style) use of 'know':

---

[15] Much closer is the 'structured meaning' account of questions proposed by Tichy, von Stechow, Krifka and others. For a clear presentation see (Krifka 2001), which draws attention to various advantages, especially concerning the continued stress on the relevant term, even when a full sentence answer is given. In that piece though, Krifka suggests that the different types of embedded questions should be unified by means of a rule that reduces knowing-*wh* to knowing-*that*, a move that runs counter to the approach suggested here. I am not convinced that the embedded conjunctions that this move is designed to accommodate—for example of 'what' and 'whether'—are as straightforwardly available as he suggests. Contrast: 'He knows where and when to get help'/'He knows where to get help, and when', with 'He knows where and whether to get help'/*'He knows where to get help, and whether'.

[16] (Harris, Yang & Cui 2017). Adam and Sarah's corpuses also form part of those used in (Chouinard 2017).

What did he say to you? He know me (33m);
You know all my pants (34m).

What Harris *et al.* don't remark on though, is that in the period they were observing, i.e., up to 36 months, none of the utterances took a sentential complement. They either involved the 'know' of acquaintance, or, overwhelmingly, took a *wh*-clause, either explicitly, as in several of Adam's utterances quoted above, or implicitly, as in Sarah's responses to *wh*-questions. In fact all of Sarah's uses of 'I don't know' were in response to *wh*-questions, and never in response to yes/no questions.

But then suddenly and strikingly, just past the end of Harris's sampling period, the use of know with a *that*-complement comes in. In a session at 36 months and 11 days we get a burst of such constructions from Adam:

how d(o) you know it going eat supper;
how d(o) you know dat a duck;
how d(o) you know dat convertible [talking about a car];
how d(o) you know (.) I saw ducks.

Similarly from Sarah, at 36 months and 27 days we get:

Adult: She'll tell you when she sees you
Sarah: I know.

Adult: That's naughty you know
Sarah: I know.

And then at 37 months at 3 days:

Adult: He hasn't got a bathing suit like you
Sarah: I know it.

Obviously this is a very small sample; a great deal more work needs to be done before any firm conclusions can be drawn. But nevertheless it does lend support to the possibility that children first come to understand knowledge with a *wh*-clause, and only later with a *that*-complement.

More broadly, it suggests that the difficulty children have with verbs like 'think' might come from the fact that they insist on *that*-complements. There is a striking contrast with the observation that children can use 'want', which again doesn't take a *that*-complement, very early. *That*-complements require children to understand something like a possibility or a state of affairs; and that may well be a much more difficult task that just understanding the objectual referents of *wh*-clauses and early desire ascriptions.

As I say, much more work needs to be done here. But if these findings do hold up, what might we conclude for the account of 'know'? The first point concerns reduction. If the young child can understand knows-*wh* ascriptions, but not knows-*that*, then there is clearly some sense in which the former understanding cannot reduce to—cannot itself be fundamentally understood in terms of—the latter. It is possible that later, when the child can understand both sorts of ascriptions, they will somehow come to assimilate one to the other, and perhaps then the sentential complements will take priority. But that would involve a revision of their earlier understanding, and we would need good evidence that such a change occurs.

Can we conclude anything about the nature of knowledge? Obviously the distinction we have drawn so far is at the level of *ascriptions*, not at the level of *mental states*. When the child knows who is in the kitchen, it is fine to say that they know that their father is in the kitchen; in fact it is hard to give any content to their knowledge without using a *that*-complement, and it is obligatory if we want to report a mistake. Nonetheless, there may be a way in which the factual knows-*wh* ascription is more appropriate, more revelatory, of the child's mental state. If the child is in no position to understand the idea of a possible state of affairs that is represented by a proposition, then a description of their mental state that makes use of such a device, though it is something that we use all the time, is nevertheless employing something that is more sophisticated than the child has. The child's mental state is better represented by the object understood as an answer to the question; or as we might put it, a state of knowledge-*wh*. And if this is true of the young child, why not say the same of the adult? The knowledge that can be naturally ascribed using knows-*wh* might be better thought of as knowledge-*wh* than as knowledge-*that*.

There is a still broader point to be made here. As the philosophical mood has moved towards externalism, so there has been an issue over how to handle illusion and mistake. The standard response has been disjunctivism: take the successful case as central, and treat illusion or mistake as unsuccessful attempts at that. Some have gone further, denying that there can be a thought with no object—holding that a sentence containing a non-referring singular term can only give rise to an apparent thought. This can seem artificial: a philosopher's legislation that what looks like a thought isn't. But there are parts of natural language where such an approach is not at all strained. Factives provide a central and much discussed case. It is not philosopher's legislation that insists that a falsehood cannot be known. At the level of the *mental state* there is a clear asymmetry between the successful—knowledge—and the unsuccessful—mere belief. In such cases though, the corresponding move to externalism at the level of *reference* is less straightforward. If the object of knowledge is a proposition, then it is the same both for knowledge and for belief. Some, including me, have suggested an asymmetry at this level too, arguing that the object of knowledge-*that* is a fact, and not a proposition, but it is far from clear quite how facts are to be understood (Vendler 1972; Ginzburg 1995; Holton 2017). In contrast if the objects of knowledge-*wh* are indeed objects in the sense argued here, we have a very straightforward example of how it can involve a direct connection to the world, in just the way that externalists have thought.

If knowledge-*wh* does involve this direct registering of the world, we might wonder whether there is a parallel form of communication that provides a way to share it, and so involves a direct indication of the world. It is to that I now turn.

II. TELLING

In a discussion of testimony, John McDowell proposes that we should understand the central cases of communication in terms of a factive verb, but he struggles to come up with a candidate. He suggests 'communicate that p', which he describes as 'perhaps mildly barbarous', and then moves, rather unenthusiastically, to 'get it across that p' (McDowell 1980: 37). Understandably he doesn't use 'tell that p', since that is clearly not factive; I can tell someone that p, and yet be mistaken, or be lying.

A change of clause though would have given him the construction he sought. When it takes a *wh*-clause, 'tell' requires the truth of what is said. If, lying, I tell you *that* the documents are back in the safe, when in fact they are in my bag, I have not told you *where* the documents are. Likewise, the axeman comes to the door in search of your friend who is hiding upstairs. You tell him *that* your friend left hours ago; you do this exactly in order not to tell him *where your friend is*.[17]

Quite why 'tell' shifts in this way, giving a non-factive reading with a *that*-complement, and a truth requiring one with a *wh*-complement, is unclear.[18] Plausibly a number of other closely related verbs work in the same way: 'announce', perhaps 'state'.[19] In many ways tell-*wh* mirrors know-*wh*, and so works as the natural device for reporting on the transfer of knowledge. I will discuss some of the similarities between the two constructions below. But first let us consider a feature that tell-*wh* shares with tell-*that*.

'Tell', in contrast to 'say' and 'assert', is very insistently transitive, with both *wh*-clauses and *that*-complements, requiring mention of the person to whom the thing is told:

---

[17] The observation dates back to Karttunen (1977). Not everyone is in agreement; Tsohatzidis (1993) objects, as more recently do Spector and Égre (2015). My response to Tsohatzidis is in (Holton 1997); the general approach there, via participant projection, receives empirical support for the case of knowledge in (Buckwalter 2014). My response to Spector and Égre would be much the same lines, as it would be to some more recent pieces, for instance (Dahlmana and de Weijerb 2019).

[18] Schlenker has argued that even with a sentential complement, 'tell' is sometimes factive—'She told no one that she was pregnant'. I'm not entirely convinced. Suppose we all knew it was a case of pseudocyesis; it's not obvious that that would make the ascription inappropriate. But the issues are certainly delicate. See (Schlenker 2007) and (Spector & Égre 2015: 1738–41) for further development.

[19] See (Spector & Égre 2015: 1740). They add 'predict' to the list, though to my ear that is more like 'guess' in that is has both a truth requiring and a non-truth requiring reading on both the *wh*- and the *that*-forms.

I asserted where the keys were
*I told where the keys were
I told her where the keys were

Telling is thus an essentially social act. In this 'tell' patterns with some other illocutionary verbs like 'warn' and 'threaten' (though these are anti-rogative). And as with them, the question arises as to what requirements are placed on the recipient; in the case that interests us, what is required of someone for it to be true that they have been told. It is not enough simply that they be the intended audience; there needs to be some uptake. 'The defendant claims that she told my client of the arrangements' says counsel. 'I put it to her that she could not have done, since the defendant speaks only English, and my client speaks only Japanese.' In the absence of translators or the like, that looks like a good argument.

What does the uptake consist in? Clearly it doesn't require belief in what is told; the hearer can remain unconvinced. It doesn't even seem to require that the hearer listens: 'I told him over and over but he wouldn't listen' is a familiar complaint. A natural suggestion is that we understand uptake in terms of potentialities. Here we can borrow an idea from Manuel Garcia-Carpintero (2004), who, developing Williamson's normative constraint that one should only assert if one knows, argues for a corresponding normative constraint on the position of the listener:

> One must assert p only if one's audience comes thereby to be in a position to know.

If we work with the told-*wh* construction, which requires truth, we can transform that from a normative to a descriptive requirement, expressed rather clumsily as a schema, with the two 'wh's' to be filled in identically:

> One can tell-*wh* only if the person one tells thereby comes to be in a position to know-*wh*.

If this is right, it puts a corresponding requirement on the teller, for a speaker can only impart knowledge by telling if they had the knowledge to begin with. Of course, as Hawley made very clear, listeners might arrive at new *non-testimonial* knowledge from what people say even when the speakers are ignorant of it themselves: you might realise that someone has mistaken who you are from the questions they ask; a doctor might recognize that I have had a stroke from the way that I speak (Hawley 2010). But telling involves the transfer of knowledge, and that requires knowledge on the part of the speaker.[20] So alongside Williamson's

---

[20] This remains, I think, the majority view, but it has not gone unchallenged, most famously by Lackey (1999; 2008), who proposes various counter-examples. In my view these turn out to be either cases where the purportedly ignorant teller is merely a go-between, transmitting knowledge from the real teller to the audience (I think of her celebrated creationist teacher example in this way); and cases where there isn't really telling going on, but the hearer is simply using the speaker's words as evidence about the state of the world. For a helpful discussion see (Wright, 2019).

normative requirement on assertion — one should assert only when one knows — we get a corresponding constitutive requirement on telling-*wh*: one can only tell-*wh* if one knows-*wh*.

How plausible is this? Suppose, having no idea where the keys have been hidden, I answer your question about where they are by saying confidently: 'They are in amongst the lavender in the kitchen garden under the elder'. Suppose, by pure fluke, I am right; that is indeed where they are hidden. I have certainly told you *that* they were hidden there, but have I told you *where* they were hidden? On this account I haven't, for, not knowing where they were, I was in no position to tell you. That doesn't seem obviously right to me, but it doesn't seem obviously wrong either; this strikes me as one of those cases where intuitions are weak, and we are better guided by overall theoretical considerations.

The requirements that tell-*wh* puts on truthfulness turn out to be still more complex than have been identified so far. They involve, as we have seen, telling nothing but the truth; but they also, in some circumstances, require telling the whole truth. We start by considering know-*wh*, which has received more discussion, before returning to tell-*wh*.

What do you need to know in order to know who was in the Beatles? You must know that it was John, Paul, George and Ringo. You don't know if you think, thrown by the Willy Russell musical, that it was John, Paul, George, Ringo and Bert.[21] In this case you have a false belief. But neither do you know if you know only that John and Paul were in the Beatles.[22] Then you know only who *some* of the Beatles were. In this case there needn't be any false belief involved. You need not mistakenly think that there was only John and Paul; the partiality of your knowledge is enough to disqualify you from possessing the relevant knowledge-*who*.

Let me say something about each of these conditions. The first—nothing but the truth—has been taken by B.R. George (2013) to provide part of the reason for not reducing knowledge-*wh* to knowledge-*that*; the idea is that the former supervenes not just on the knowledge-*that* facts, but also on the belief facts.[23] This might seem to complement the developmental anti-reducibility argument given earlier, but in fact the two are in some tension. The developmental argument was premised on the idea that young children who can make knowledge-*wh* ascriptions are not yet able to make belief ascriptions; whereas George's argument looks to assume that knowledge-*wh* ascriptions tacitly involve belief ascriptions. In the absence of more empirical work it is hard to know what to say here. It could be that knowledge-*wh* ascriptions do evolve from the simple form employed by young children, which

---

[21] To know who was in the Beatles do you need to know that it was John, Paul, George and Ringo, *and nobody else*? Probably not, provided that you don't positively think that there was somebody else in the band.. See (Klinedinst & Rothschild 2011).

[22] This insight goes back to Groenendijk & Stokhof. (1982: 179–81).

[23] George's argument is actually considerably more subtle than suggested here, exploiting the features of the 'knows-some' cases mentioned below. But this doesn't, I think, affect my discussion.

involve no awareness of belief, to a more complex form. Or it could be that young children are sensitive to the idea that certain behaviours act as defeaters for knowledge-*wh* ascriptions, even if they have no articulated theory of such behaviours. There is some reason for thinking that this might be the case. Paul Harris (2012: 88–91) reports that young children of three or even two years old will tend to disregard all testimony from someone they know has said anything false. In contrast, by the age of four or five, they will accept testimony from someone who has said a few falsehoods, provided they know them to be generally reliable. Harris's explanation is that at the younger age they do not yet have the theory of belief that would enable them to make the more discriminating response. I know of no studies on whether young children would ascribe knowledge-*wh* in cases where the subject's knowledge is accompanied by relevant false beliefs; but it is certainly not out of the question that they would not.

The second condition—the whole truth—turns out to be more complicated than the Beatles example suggests. Elaborating on an example from George, consider an Italian visiting an English-speaking city and asking:

> Where can one buy an Italian newspaper?

There are obvious pragmatic constraints on a helpful answer to this question. 'In Rome' is certainly not helpful. But beyond that, it seems that a good answer to the question doesn't need to be exhaustive; it is enough to mention one relevant newsagent. Correspondingly, you can know where one can buy an Italian newspaper by knowing of one such newsagent; you don't need to know them all. George calls this a 'mention-*some*' reading of the question.

It might be thought that this is a purely pragmatic phenomenon, but for reasons discussed by George, it isn't readily explained by Gricean maxims. Nonetheless, the mention-*some* interpretation does not come from the grammar of the sentence alone. Imagine instead that the same question were asked by a police officer; a copy of an Italian newspaper has been found at the scene of a crime. In this case it would be a mention-*all* reading that would be intended.

This context sensitivity becomes all the more marked when we consider *wh*-constructions combined with the little discussed preposition 'about'.[24] Consider first a simple 'about' sentence:

> She told me all about the Beatles.

'All' is clearly not to be taken literally here (where would one stop?); in fact the sentence doesn't obviously differ in truth conditions from

> She told me about the Beatles

---

[24] For an excellent general discussion see (Rawlins 2013).

Clearly though some facts are compulsory. If I knew nothing at all about them, and she failed to tell me that they were a pop group, or that they were from Liverpool, then she wouldn't have told me all about the Beatles. There will be discretion about what needs to be told; and crucially, since it is typically the teller who has knowledge of how things stand (why else would they be telling?), it will typically be up to the teller to decide what needs to be said.

Consider then what happens when we combine 'about' with a *wh*-clause:

> She told me about who was at the party

Does that get a mention-*all* or a mention-*some* reading? Plausibly the latter, especially if it was a big party. Who gets to decide who should be mentioned? Obviously the teller, since they are in possession of the knowledge; in that sense they have discretion. But clearly that discretion can be misused, so that there will be cases where an omission means that they have failed to tell me who was at the party. With all this in mind, let's turn to Hawley's account of telling.

III HAWLEY ON TELLING

Chapter Three of Katherine Hawley's book *How to be Trustworthy* (2019) is entitled 'Telling'; the aim is to provide an account that dovetails with her general account of trust. However, she actually frames her account, not in terms of telling, but in terms of assertion, 'mainly' she says 'because this fits with the majority of authors I engage with'. I want to suggest that something important is lost in that concession. My argument will be (i) that Hawley would do better to phrase the account in terms of telling, in particular of telling-*wh*; and (ii) that this in turn will bring out the features of the trust that is involved here.

Hawley's account is framed in terms of the somewhat odd locution 'asserting as to whether p.'[25] Her substantial claim is this:

> Asserting as to whether p involves both:
> (a) promising to speak truthfully as to whether p; and
> (b) speaking truthfully or untruthfully as to whether p, i.e. keeping or breaking the promise. (2019: 51)

The trustworthy speaker, of course, is one who keeps their promise.

Assertion, unlike telling, does not require an audience, and Hawley's decision to use it in her account is linked to her caution concerning the assurance accounts put

---

[25] Google (October 2022) presents only two instances other than Hawley's, both recent and from the Madras High Court. I find no other examples from Indian English, which makes me think that these are simply a quirk of an individual writer.

forward by writers such as Edward Hinchman (2005) and Richard Moran (2018), and others. Here the idea is that the speaker takes on responsibility for what they say to their intended audience. This sounds to be very similar to Hawley's idea of promising, but she wants to distance herself from these accounts. Her concern, following various others, is that eavesdroppers may have equal entitlement to be assured of the truth of what is said as the intended addressee.

But the move to assertion does not enable Hawley to remain neutral: the issue comes straight back in the question of who the promise is to. Assertions might not need audiences, but promises certainly need promisees. Who is the recipient of the promise involved in assertion? Hawley's official account doesn't tell us. Later though, in passing, she does say (2019: 58–9) that the person who is addressed by the speaker is the person who receives the promise. So the assertion does have a recipient after all: it is the addressee, who receives the promise.

Once we understand things this way, the caution that Hawley shows towards the assurance accounts of Hinchman and Moran seems misplaced. For there are very good reasons for thinking that any promise made in assertion is addressed to a particular recipient or group of recipients; and this is so even if the primary commitment is to telling the truth. Take a nice pair of contrasting cases from Hinchman (2020). Someone asks you what is in a bowl of some snack from which you have been nibbling. In the first case, you know your questioner simply doesn't much like nuts. 'It's an interesting Bombay mix but without any peanuts' you say, on the basis of how it tastes to you. In the second case you know that your questioner has a serious allergy to peanuts. Now you are no longer prepared to provide that assurance. 'I can't taste any peanuts', you might say, 'but you'd better check.' In both cases your promise is to tell the truth; but when the stakes are high, you are in no position to make the promise. (I sidestep the much contested question of whether, when the stakes are high, you fail to know that there are no peanuts; whether knowledge is therefore prone to pragmatic encroachment. That would fit nicely with the conditions on assertion discussed in the previous section, but there are ways of avoiding it.)

I suggest then that phrasing her account in terms of assertion is misleading; Hawley would do better sticking with the idea of telling, with its insistence on a specific audience. But do we need tell-*that*, or telling -*wh*? Following Hawley, let's approach the issue through the lens of trust, or, more particularly, that of distrust, a topic that she has done so much to bring back onto the philosophical stage. What is it about someone's behaviour as an informant that might lead us to distrust them?

Hawley characterises distrust in terms of two factors, (i) a commitment from one party, understood not as a psychological state, but as a kind of normative requirement; and (ii) a failure to rely by the other:

> To distrust someone to do something is to believe that she has a commitment to doing it, and yet not rely on her to meet that commitment. (2019: 9)

This construes distrust as a three-place predicate—A distrusts B to C—whereas normal English makes it two-place—A distrusts B. But I'll leave the question of whether that is significant till later. My initial focus is on the second condition here, that the person who distrusts doesn't rely on the person they distrust. That doesn't seem quite right as a constitutive factor in distrust. There might be many reasons why you would not rely on an individual who you thought had a relevant commitment, while nevertheless not distrusting them. You might not need to rely on them, since you might not need to rely at all, or you might be able to rely on someone else. Or even if you had no alternatives, you might not want to burden them, and so be prepared to bear the costs of not relying. Conversely, if there really is no alternative and you cannot afford to bear the costs, you might be forced to rely on them even if you distrust them, thinking this is better than nothing.

More plausibly we could rephrase the condition in a more dispositional way: if you distrust someone you wouldn't be *prepared* to rely on them, at least not if it could be avoided. That adds some vagueness, but plausibly it is vagueness we want. In the particular case of testimony, if one distrusts an individual as a speaker, one is not prepared to treat them as a reliable source of information.

So why might one distrust someone as a teller in this way? One possibility is that they are inclined to lie. Hawley's account generally handles such cases well. The speaker has implicitly promised to speak truthfully and they fail to do so. But there can be other reasons for distrusting someone. We have already seen one such in the case of the peanut allergy. Here, speaking truthfully will not be enough to reveal the teller as trustworthy; they would need to be sensitive to what is at stake. In such cases the potential failure would involve what Hawley (2019: 88) calls 'over-reaching'; the agent would lack the certainty to make the statement they make. But there are many other cases where the primary issue is different: it is with failures to say enough.

Take some examples, starting with the more melodramatic. In a notorious 1973 letter that marked the breakdown of their friendship, Jean-Luc Godard wrote to François Truffaut: 'Probably no one will call you a liar, so I'll do it… A liar, because the shot of you and Jacqueline Bisset the other night at Chez Francis is not in your film' (Jacob & de Givray 1988: 423). To see the force, we need some context: Truffaut had been having an affair with Bisset while she was starring in his film *La Nuit americaine*, a film that featured Truffaut as the director of a film in which Bisset starred, and so was naturally read as self-referential. The film, however, contained no reference to the affair; 'I wonder why the director is the only one who doesn't screw in La Nuit americaine' complained Godard. He was, characteristically, pushing things when he accused Truffaut of lying, but we can see his point. He held that Truffaut hadn't been admitting what he should have been admitting: he hadn't been telling his audience the truth.

Some more examples, this time from subjects whom one might hope would be less cavalier than Godard. In the U.S. Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justices, candidates have routinely been asked about what they would do if faced

with a challenge to *Roe v. Wade*. None said that they would overturn the decision, but in *Dobbs* six justices voted to do just that. Were they lying in their testimony? Some claimed that they were: 'Several of these conservative Justices ... have lied to the U.S. Senate' said Pelosi and Schumer in their joint statement after the draft of *Dobbs* was leaked. Again though, it is unclear that anyone lied. The more accurate complaints are two-fold. The first is that some of the candidates *misled* the Senate, even if they didn't lie. 'It is settled as a precedent of the Supreme Court, entitled to respect under principles of *stare decisis*,' said Kavanaugh of *Roe*. 'The Supreme Court has recognized the right to abortion since the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case. It has reaffirmed it many times.' In the context, and without qualification, that is misleading; it suggests that Kavanaugh himself treated it as settled precedent, which clearly, given his subsequent vote, he did not. Other candidates—for instance, Alito and Thomas—were more circumspect. The complaint then was not that what they said was misleading. It was that they refused to answer. Even a clear refusal, acknowledged by everyone as such, can warrant distrust. That is all the more so when a speaker doesn't make clear that there are things they are not saying. '[I]t was a dishonest speech, more important for its omissions and its concealments than for anything that spoke' wrote the *Guardian* journalist Martin Kettle of a speech by the short-lived UK Prime Minister Liz Truss (*Guardian*, 5th Oct. 2022).

It should be clear where I am heading. Trustworthy speech is not simply speech that is truthful; it needs to be informative about the subject at issue, in the sense that it should convey what the hearer needs to know. That is, it follows the requirements that, as we saw in the last section, are brought by the tells-*wh* construction. The concern that the Supreme Court candidates showed themselves untrustworthy is the concern that they failed to tell the senators what they would do if faced with a challenge to *Roe*. Whether that really did show them to be untrustworthy, or whether the implicit rules of the highly formalized Senate testimonies permit such a failure, is a question I won't address here. Clearly though, with a friend or a family member, it is exactly the failure to tell one what they have been doing, when and with whom, that bring complaints of dishonesty, and hence an attitude of distrust.

I suggest then that a picture of the trust involved in testimony would best focus, not on telling-*that*, but on telling-*wh*. For this truth is not enough, for, as we have seen, it sometimes requires completeness (mention-*all*) and sometimes a good choice of relevance (mention-*some*). This latter feature means that, when we ask questions, we trust our informants to make good choices on which things to tell us about. Indeed the trust has to be more global still, for while in some cases we will know enough to be able to ask specific questions, in others we won't. We expect those whom we trust to tell us when something happens that would matter to us, whether or not we know enough to ask.

Correspondingly, when we distrust, there need be no particular way in which we expect we might be let down, since we may well not know how those we distrust might fail us. They are exactly those who we fear would fail to let us know how things that are important to us stand. As I mentioned earlier Hawley gives her

account of distrust in terms of the three-place relation of A distrusting B to do C rather than the two-place relation of A distrusting B. She admits that this is an awkward formulation—it certainly isn't normal English—but invites us to put any qualms on one side to see its fruitfulness. My suspicion is that this is more than just an insignificant feature of normal English. The reason that we idiomatically understand distrust as a global, two-place, relation is that we know that we cannot reliably fill in the third place in an informative way. It is a feature we ascribe to those we distrust that they may withhold the very information that will enable us to see the ways that they might let us down.

In briefly addressing the kinds of cases that I have been discussing, Hawley says

> [T]trustworthiness is compatible with saying relatively little, or at least asserting relatively little, either by remaining silent or by speaking in a hedging or speculative fashion which tries to evade responsibility for the truth of what is said. That is, we may avoid any attempt to speak truthfully but without framing this as fulfilment of a commitment to do so. This reflects my understanding of trustworthiness as a primarily negative requirement to avoid unfilled commitments, rather than a positive requirement to seek out new commitments and fulfil them. (2019: 89)

Although this view has had some esteemed defenders, notably Kant, I find it surprising.[26] The lover who fails to tell their partner about their infidelity could scarcely escape censure by insisting that they had never committed to detailing their affairs; quite naturally we would think that their failure had undermined their trustworthiness. (It would be different if the parties had agreed to a 'don't ask, don't-tell' open relationship; but let us assume these hadn't.) This is not, I think, primarily a question of a requirement to form new commitments. It is rather that our commitments as truth-tellers are much broader in scope than a commitment to telling the truth when we utter some particular sentence. With trust, as with distrust, I'd suggest that the patterns of commitment are more global. In joint work with Jacopo Domenicucci (2017) I have argued that trust, as well as distrust, should be seen as a two-place relation — we grant the person we trust discretion to act in domains beyond our knowledge. Perhaps the insistence on a two-place relation is too strong for cases of epistemic trust; I might, after all trust someone as an authority on a certain topic, and that topic can be seen as providing the third term. Nonetheless. I want to resist the idea that when we trust someone epistemically, our trust can typically be understood as just trusting them to speak truthfully. It is much broader than that.

---

[26] For discussion of Kant's views see (Langton, 1992) and (Mahon, 2006).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Following Hawley's interests, this paper has ranged rather widely—probably too widely—over the semantics of *wh*-ascriptions, the semantics of telling, and accounts of testimony and trust. I have meant it to be more exploratory than conclusive, and my two main claims are largely independent. I have argued that we can understand factual *wh*-constructions as involving relations to objects; and I have argued that testimony is best understood in terms of telling-*wh*. These two ideas sit very nicely together, but neither requires the other.

Much of what I have said at the end has been critical of some of the details of Hawley's account. Lest that lead anyone to think that I have learned little from her, that disagreement is incompatible with learning, let me give her the last word:

> Suppose that, as a result of listening to you speak, I formulate a new thought—perhaps even one that I could not have formulated before. Maybe something you say provides me with a concept I did not previously possess, or prompts me to think more closely about propositions I already know … As a result, I come to know a proposition I did not previously know … you say something which gives me a new perspective, enables me to see things in a new light. (Hawley 2010: 398–9)

REFERENCES

Boër, S. & W. Lycan (1986) *Knowing Who*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Buckwalter, W. (2014) 'Factive verbs and protagonist projection', *Episteme*, 11: 391–409.

Chouinard, M. (2007) *Children's Questions: A Mechanism for Cognitive Development*, Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 72.

Dahlmana, R. C. & J. de Weijerb (2019) 'Testing factivity in Italian. Experimental evidence for the hypothesis that Italian sapere is ambiguous', *Language Sciences*, 72: 93–103.

Domenicucci, J. & R. Holton (2017) 'Trust as a Two-place Relation', in P. Faulkner & T. Simpson (eds.) *The Philosophy of Trust*, 149–60. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Égre P. (2008) 'Question-embedding and factivity', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 77: 85–125.

Farcas, K. (2016) 'Know-wh does not reduce to Know-that', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 53: 109–22.

García-Carpintero, M. (2004) 'Assertion and the Semantics of Force-Markers', in C. Bianchi (ed.) *The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction*, 133–166. Stanford: CSLI.

George, B. R. (2013) 'Knowing-'wh', mention-some readings, and non-reducibility', *Thought*, 2: 166–177.

Ginzburg, J. (1995) 'Resolving Questions I' and 'Resolving Questions II', *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 18: 459–527 and 567–609.

Groenendijk, J. & M. Stokhof. (1982) 'Semantic Analysis of "Wh"-Complements', *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 5: 175-233.

— 1984. *Studies in the semantics of questions and the pragmatics of answers.* Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam dissertation.

Harris, P. L. (2012) *Trusting What You're Told.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Harris P. L., B. Yang & Y. Cui (2017) '"I Don't Know": Children's Early Talk About Knowledge', *Mind & Language*, 32: 283–307.

Hawley, K. (2003) 'Success and Knowledge-How', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 40: 19–31.

— (2010) 'Testimony and Knowing How', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 41: 397–404.

— (2019) *How to be Trustworthy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Higginbotham, J. (1996) 'The Semantics of Questions', in S. Lappin (ed.) *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory*, 361–83. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hinchman, E. (2005) 'Telling as Inviting to Trust', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 70: 562–587.

— (2020) 'Assertion and Testimony', in S. Goldberg (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Assertion*, 555–79. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holton, R. (1997) 'Some Telling Examples: Reply to Tsohatzidis', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 28: 625-8.

— (2017) 'Facts, Factives and Contra-factives', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume, 91: 245–66.

Humberstone, I.L. (1990) 'Wanting Getting, Having,' *Philosophical Papers*, 19: 99–118.

Jacob, G. & C. de Givray (1988), *François Truffaut: Correspondance*. Paris: Hatier.

Karttunen, L. (1977) 'Syntax and semantics of questions', *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 1: 3–44.

Klinedinst, N. & D. Rothschild (2011) 'Exhaustivity in questions with non-factives', *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 4: 1–23.

Krifka, M. (2001) 'For a Structured Meaning Account of Questions and Answers' in C. Féry and W. Sternefeld (eds.) *Audiatur Vox Sapientiae: A Festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*, 287–319. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Lackey, J. (1999) 'Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 49: 471–90.

— (2008) *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lahiri, U. (2002) *Questions and Answers in Embedded Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Langton, R. (1992) 'Duty and Desolation', *Philosophy*, 67: 481–505.

McDowell, J. (1980) 'Meaning, Communication and Knowledge', in Z. van Straaten (ed.) *Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); reprinted in his *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 29–50. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Mahon, J. (2006) 'Kant and Maria von Herbert: Reticence vs. Deception', *Philosophy*, 81: 417 – 44.

Moran, R. (2018) *The Exchange of Words*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rawlins, K. (2013) 'About "about"', in N. Snider (ed.), *Proceedings of SALT*, 23: 336–357.

Roelofsen, F. (2019a) 'Surprise for Lauri Karttunen', in C. Condoravdi, and T. Holloway King, (eds.), *Tokens of Meaning*, 159–86. Stanford: CSLI.

— (2019b) 'Semantic Theories of Questions' in M. Aronoff (ed.) *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schlenker, P. (2007) 'Transparency: An incremental theory of presupposition projection' in U. Sauerland & P. Stateva (eds.), *Presupposition and implicature in compositional semantics*, 214–42. New York: Palgrave.

Soames, S. (2009) 'Linguistic Theory and Psychology' and 'Semantic Theory and Psychology' in his *Philosophical Essays* Vol. 1, 133–81. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Spector, B. & P. Égre (2015) 'A uniform semantics for embedded interrogatives', *Synthese*, 192: 1729–84.

Tsohatzidis S. L. (1993) 'Speaking of Truth-Telling: the View from Wh-complements', *Journal of Pragmatics*: 19, 271–9.

Vendler, Z. (1972) *Res Cogitans*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Wright, S. (2018) *Knowledge Transmission*. London: Routledge.