

Telling as Joint Action: comments on Richard Moran's *The Exchange of Words*

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In *The Exchange of Words* Richard Moran's overarching thesis is that a proper understanding of telling is of great significance for the epistemology of testimony. In particular he claims that a proper view of telling is the key to providing an anti-reductive account of testimony. Most of EW is not about the argument for anti-reductivism, because Moran's aim is also to expand our conception of the scope of the epistemology of testimony, to include questions about normative relations between speaker and addressee. Moran's principle claim is that particular normative relations between a speaker and her addressee are what make it the case that telling produces a testimonial reason. (Especially, the relation of the speaker to the addressee when the speaker freely takes responsibility for the truth of P.) Consequently, the book is an exploration of the way the relevant normative relations of speaker and addressee are put in place by a linguistic act. Moran emphasizes that telling is governed by linguistic practices that enable special kinds of publicity or openness in the relationship of speaker and addressee, without which openness the relevant normative relations would not be effected.

This exploration of Moran's is fascinating and creates new vistas at the intersection of epistemology, philosophy of language and moral psychology. Unsurprisingly, there are challenges in fitting together the various elements Moran appeals to in the course of creating his account of telling. What's striking about the book is the evolution the reader finds within it, from an account of telling focused on the authority, freedom and self-knowledge of the speaker, to an account of telling that highlights the role of the audience. I found this one of the most exciting developments of Moran's work, and in what follows, I explore some questions this development gives rise to, as well as some possibilities it presents.

### Authority, freedom and self-knowledge of the speaker

Moran emphasizes that the speaker has authority, freedom and self-knowledge in performing her speech act. The speaker has authority over her communicative intention, as well as over the particular illocutionary act she performs. She "plays an **authoritative role in determining the illocutionary status of her utterance** (e.g.,

as promise or assertion), ..." [129 my emphasis]. Authority to make up one's mind regarding one's intentions and other mental states is a familiar theme in Moran's earlier work, and we see that idea extended here to include the illocutionary status (aka "force") of the speaker's utterance.

The speaker also has **freedom in the performance of the telling**—freedom without which the act would not have its special reason-giving power:

... it is essential to the distinctive reason for belief that I get from being told that it proceeds from something freely undertaken by the other person [the speaker]. Only as a free declaration does it have that value for me. [45]

We don't find much in the book in the way of a positive account of the relevant sense of freedom, but at a minimum, freedom requires that the person is *conscious* of her action:

... a specific assumption of responsibilities is essentially an expression of a person's freedom, something that only makes sense as consciously assumed. [61]

Freedom has a central role in distinguishing testimonial reasons from other sorts of reasons for belief:

...dependence on someone's freely assuming responsibility for the truth of P, presenting herself as a kind of guarantor, provides me with a characteristic reason to believe, different in kind from anything provided by impersonal evidence alone. [45]

And Moran argues, it is this dependence of the speaker's freedom that makes testimonial reasons distinctive and irreducible to the sum of other kinds of reasons or evidence. Moran thus stands opposed to reductivists, who would treat testimonial reasons as depending on an inference from evidence, and who do not give any significant role to "the speaker's freedom and the hearer's dependence on it" in the production of a testimonial reason. [45]

Finally, the speaker has a special kind of **self-knowledge** of the illocutionary status of her utterance. Here also, Moran sounds a theme that is familiar in his earlier work, where self-knowledge of one's intentions and attitudes is *practical knowledge*—that is, knowledge without inference from observation:

It is not by self-observation that the speaker knows this [illocutionary status]... [152]

... the speaker's knowledge of the illocutionary status of her utterance is practical as well as institutional... [216]

These qualities of the speaker's act—her authority, freedom and self-knowledge in telling—are connected and essential if the speaker is to be in a position to provide her addressee a reason of this distinctively testimonial kind. Moran also holds that these qualities are not sufficient for the production of a testimonial reason: telling requires the speaker to tap into social linguistic conventions in appropriate ways, and to gain the recognition of appropriate addressees. With these further requirements, some questions arise: What exactly is the role of the addressee, and how are we to understand the authority, freedom, and self-knowledge of the speaker in light of the addressee's role? And stepping further back, How do linguistic practices affect the speaker's freedom, self-knowledge and authority?

### The role of the addressee

Moran sees a role for the addressee on the ground floor of telling:

... there is a prior involvement of others in the speaker's ability to confer a particular status on her words, one that adds a further dimension to the authority that is specifically illocutionary and its second-personal dimension. For naturally the speaker can only appeal to the freedom of another person, and *bind herself to it in specific ways*, if this appeal is recognized by the other person. [134 my emphasis]

The addressee's recognition is not simply an awareness of an already constituted telling for what it is; rather, his recognition is necessary for the utterance to constitute the specific form of normative relation found in telling (as opposed to a warning, etc.).

Recognition is not all the audience contributes. Moran goes on to suggest that the speaker's practical knowledge of her illocutionary act depends on the addressee's practical knowledge:

For the act of asserting or promising to take place the two parties have to both understand and 'know together' what it is that they are doing, for this shared knowledge is the formal cause of the reality of the act of illocution itself. [167]

If we accept Moran's view about the necessity of the addressee's recognition and practical knowledge in constituting a telling, some questions arise. For instance: How can we reconcile the requirement of shared practical knowledge with the speaker's *authority* to constitute her utterance as a telling? How can we reconcile this requirement with the speaker's *practical* (i.e. *non-observational*) self-knowledge of her speech act as a telling? Is a testimonial reason only constituted where there is shared practical knowledge?

### Telling as Joint Action

I believe Moran may have satisfying answers to some of these questions if we follow his view to its logical conclusion. Taken together, Moran's claims about the role of the addressee point to the idea that *telling is a joint action*.<sup>1</sup> This is a deep insight, and a transformative one. Some linguists—a minority—share this idea about speech acts, and see joint action on the part of speaker and audience at every level of communication. As (Clark 1996) spells out of the idea, speech acts involve a proposal for joint action by the speaker, taken up or modified by the addressee; in the case of telling, the speaker S proposes to the addressee A that they jointly change A's beliefs about p, and if the audience accepts the proposal, he gets a reason to believe P, but if he rejects the proposal, no reason to believe P is constituted by the speaker's utterance. (Moran may prefer to say that S proposes that they jointly provide A with a new reason to believe p.) The joint act they engage in is comprised of tiers of sub-actions on both the addressee's and the speaker's part. For the act to convey a particular content requires a construal that is accepted by both speaker and addressee, and signaled as accepted; for the act to have the illocutionary force of a telling requires the addressee to recognize and signal his recognition of this force as intended by the speaker, and so on.

Moran can exploit the jointness of the act of telling in order to answer some questions that arise with acknowledgement of the hearer's role of recognition. For instance, because the total joint action of telling is comprised of sub-acts, we can find room for joint and individual authority, joint and individual freedom and knowledge of what speaker and addressee are about. The speaker retains sole authority to determine her *illocutionary intention*, even if she shares authority over the *illocutionary status* of her utterance. The sub-act of *uttering* with a specific communicative intention is the act of the speaker alone ("authoring" the utterance [219]), but only upon being recognized by the addressee as an utterance is that act part of a larger act in which her uttering "P" has the illocutionary force of a telling that P.

## Joint Practical Knowledge?

What about our question: Is a testimonial reason only constituted where there is shared practical knowledge? Here, Moran's view faces pressure from our pre-theoretic judgments—the requirement on joint action that it involve joint practical knowledge is quite demanding. Let's consider some cases:

*Confession*: Genie dimly perceives someone in the room with her, and makes a deathbed confession about a past crime. Her audience knows what she's doing, but Genie is unable to perceive his signals back to her, and so no joint knowledge (practical or otherwise) is produced.

*Callous*: Henrietta says to her husband, "I'm missing a sock again" and while he knows what she's saying, he doesn't signal as much; neither does he come to believe that Henrietta is missing her sock—let's imagine through sheer indifference to her plight.

*Soapbox*: Ingrid is on her soapbox and says to Augie that he is one of the saved; Augie recognizes Ingrid's communicative intention, but refuses to join her in an action of telling—he lowers his gaze and quickly walks away.

In all these cases the audience recognizes the speaker's intentions, but through lack of signaling or lack of receipt of signals, we have a lack of joint practical knowledge. I think it natural to say that in *Confession*, Genie's provides her audience with a testimonial reason to believe she committed the crime; in *Soapbox*, Ingrid does not provide Augie with a testimonial reason, however weak it may be, to believe that he is saved.<sup>2</sup> In *Callous*, we may want to say that Henrietta does provide a testimonial reason, or we may not—we'll return to this case.

*Confession* in particular puts pressure on the claim that joint practical knowledge is necessary for telling. If in response we allow that audience recognition alone suffices for reason-giving, then we run into trouble with *Soapbox*, where no testimonial reason is generated. How might Moran respond?

The perspective of telling as a joint action is analytically useful in sorting some of the complexities in these cases. If we confine ourselves to audience recognition of speaker intention and shared practical knowledge, we have too few tools to distinguish our cases. But we can distinguish cases if we remember that the joint act of telling involves a speaker proposing and an audience accepting a proposal for joint action. Acceptance of the speaker's proposal to provide a reason is required if a testimonial reason is to be constituted. (Although audience acceptance is itself

signaled in a paradigm case of telling, it need not be signaled for the telling to occur.) In *Confession*, Genie's audience is willing to enter the joint action, but in *Soapbox* Ingrid's is not. Arguably, this marks the important difference in the two cases.

What *acceptance of the speaker's proposal* itself requires is a matter for further inquiry. Still further cases give us reason to acknowledge that acceptance need not require any willingness on the actual audience's part to engage in the joint project of listening. After all, there are cases where despite the audience's reluctance, a speaker has told him something.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that there are normative demands on listeners—perhaps we should talk about the acceptance of the reasonable audience in the setting. If that's so, then for a testimonial reason to be produced, it must be possible for a reasonable audience to accept the speaker's proposal.

Consider Henrietta's case in this light. The case can be split into subcases. Is her husband really callously indifferent, or does Henrietta have a history of maundering, and her husband's lack of responsiveness to her random remarks has become routine between them? Our judgment that these features matter to testimonial reason-giving is itself a hint about something we took for granted in *Soapbox* and *Confession*—namely, we took for granted the *appropriateness* of the audience's acceptance or rejection of the speaker's proposal.

If our judgment of whether a testimonial reason is constituted depends on our sense of the appropriateness of the audience's acceptance of the speaker's proposal, then we need to understand this further normative feature of telling. *Confession* and *Soapbox* suggest that linguistic conventions may have a significant role in determining appropriateness.<sup>4</sup> Readiness to listen to a dying person's confession and lack of readiness to listen to random public address are arguably each appropriate by default in our linguistic practice. *Callous* illustrates a further feature of appropriateness judgments, namely, the role of the (reasonable) audience's assessment of the speaker's credibility, understood broadly to include not just her trustworthiness but also her epistemic competence.

Again our newfound perspective on telling as joint action may be analytically revealing. We find that evidence of credibility may be weighed at two distinct moments, the moment before accepting the speaker's proposal to jointly provide the audience a reason, and the moment after acceptance, after the audience has reached a joint construal of what the speaker's reason is to be a reason for. (Compare [58-59].) The latter moment has received a fair bit of attention in the literature on the epistemology of testimony, but the former not as much. If credibility assessment and

not simply convention is at work in *Soapbox*, then it provides an illustration of this second moment: Augie's assessment of Ingrid's credibility is required to make his refusal to enter joint action with her appropriate.

### The speaker's practical knowledge

Perhaps Moran would prefer to stand firm and maintain that telling requires joint practical knowledge. So, *Confession* is not a case of telling. The difficulty of the practical knowledge requirement goes deeper, though. Consider this case:

*Blurting*: Sabine plays tennis with her friend; she enjoys the camaraderie and exercise, but her attitude toward winning is significantly more relaxed than that of her friend. Generally, she finds it easy enough to tolerate his aggressive play and over-reactions when he loses, but one day she blurts out, "you are so competitive!"

Moran holds that blurted assertions count as tellings. About such cases, he writes:

We express our freedom not only in our considered actions, but also in the actions that go wrong, or are forced upon us, and the outbursts that we immediately regret. Blurting something out when you meant to keep silent is still a different matter from either talking in one's sleep, or having the utterance of those words be produced by electrical stimulation of the cerebral cortex. And the epistemic significance for the audience is entirely different in the two kinds of cases: in relating to the words produced by electrical stimulation we may learn something, but what we learn need not be dependent on such assumptions as, e.g., whether the person had any understanding of the words themselves, or any sense that she was providing anyone with a reason to believe something. [62]

Moran is right that although blurting happens without the benefit of the speaker's deliberate or self-aware utterance planning, the speaker is still on the hook for what she's done in a way she wouldn't be if her utterance were caused by electric stimulation of her brain. The question of the moment is, does the speaker have practical knowledge of her action? And the answer seems to be no. Sabine knows what she has done when she hears the words escaping her, or sees the look on her friend's face and realizes what she's uttered. Blurted telling places even greater pressure on the view that telling requires joint practical (i.e. non-observational) knowledge, since here, even the speaker arguably lacks practical knowledge of her act.<sup>5</sup>

If we think of telling as joint action, *Blurting* is a very useful case to think through. Sabine doesn't deliberately plan her utterance so in what sense does she *propose a joint project* in which she gives her friend a reason? The question is, how to continue seeing telling as joint action, if we drop the practical knowledge requirement?

We have options here. Models of joint action differ over their accounts of what makes for the *jointness* of joint action. Some accounts invoke special kinds of shared mental state, special kinds of interlocking intentions, or special kinds of plural agents, while some minimalist accounts require no interlocking intentions, but only shared goals and expectations (Butterfill 2012). It is an open question how we should think of the joint action of telling. Children engage in joint actions well before the capacity emerges for forming complex interlocking intentions. Arguably telling (along with assuring, warning, questioning, etc.) has a fundamental place in the learning of more complex forms of social coordination. Social beings that we are, we can be drawn into joint action without advance planning, and without deliberate intention. Perhaps then, *Blurting* shows us that the minimalist option is correct for telling. In speaking as she does, Sabine does express a belief, and a goal (getting her friend to notice his aggressiveness), by doing something she doesn't intend (in the sense of plan) to do.

Moran surely gets it right when he says telling "can be more or less reflective, more or less deliberate, more or less voluntary or under duress." [62] This goes for the audience as well: listening, too, can happen, despite one's intentions to ignore, or lack of practical knowledge of one's listening. The question we are left with is, how do we square the messy facts about telling with our understanding of joint action? I've suggested we might modify our understanding of the joint action of telling, to take account of a lack of joint practical knowledge. The aim of the modification is to let us retain Moran's insight that telling is joint action and his idea that the normative relations involved in telling are what put testimonial reasons in place. Moran is also absolutely right that the epistemology of testimony needs a better understanding of telling. Reflection on his book should convince us that the idea of telling as a joint action is the place to start.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moran's closing statements [219-20] point directly to telling as joint action.

<sup>2</sup> Due to space limits, cases are perilously under-described. Moreover, "tell" is context-sensitive—on some occasions we use "tell" to refer to a sub-act, on other occasions the total joint act. Of a particular speech act, in a context where it matters what the speaker's intentions were, we might say "S told A that P", but in a different context where it matters that audience accepted S's word, we may say of the same speech act that "S failed to tell A." Similarly, if we probe these cases looking to answer whether a reason was constituted and rejected, or never constituted in the first place, we may find judgments varying with which partner's performance we are assessing, and if we are inclined to blame or excuse.

<sup>3</sup> Such cases are at the heart of the work of feminist theorists (Langton and Hornsby 1998). There is much to be said here, and there is a growing literature springing from earlier concerns with speech acts and silencing. (Jacobson 1995) introduces the idea of a competent auditor.

<sup>4</sup> The interplay of possibly competing roles for conventions and speaker intentions is thorny ground. See (Wieland 2007), on which I don't mean to take a stand here—I merely want to suggest the importance of linguistic convention in our interpretation of such cases.

<sup>5</sup> Just what blurring is deserves more attention. I assume it involves speech without intentional utterance planning. Since practical knowledge is had in virtue of having an intention on which one acts, Sabine has no practical knowledge of her blurted speech. What if Sabine blurts in a sensory deprivation tank—isn't her knowledge non-observational? I would answer, her knowledge of her act (if she has any) owes to her reasoning from evidence accessible to her—e.g. from "hearing her voice on the inside" via bone-conducted vibrations, etc.; her knowledge does not owe to her intention to speak, as she does not have such.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Sarah Brophy, David Hills, Ram Neta, Josh Petersen, and Sarah Vernalis.