

## Can Testimony Transmit Understanding?

by

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*Abstract:* Can we transmit understanding via testimony in more or less the same way in which we transmit knowledge? The standard view in social epistemology has a straightforward answer: no, we cannot. Three arguments supporting the standard view have been formulated so far. The first appeals to the claim that gaining understanding requires a greater *cognitive effort* than acquiring testimonial knowledge does. The second appeals to a certain type of *epistemic trust* that is supposedly characteristic of knowledge transmission (and maybe of the transmission of epistemic goods in general) and that is allegedly incompatible with understanding. The third aims to show that there is a certain aspect of understanding (what epistemologists these days like to call “grasping”) that cannot be passed on to another person via testimony alone. In this article, I show that all of these arguments can be resisted. Thus, there seem to be no compelling reasons to embrace the standard view.

*Keywords:* understanding, testimony, knowledge

### 1. Introduction

CAN WE ACQUIRE UNDERSTANDING from others in more or less the same way in which we acquire knowledge? The standard view in social epistemology has a straightforward answer: no, we cannot. Consider the following quotation from Zagzebski:

Knowledge can be acquired by testimony, whereas understanding *cannot be*. A conscientious believer can obtain a true belief on the testimony of another, and given the right conditions, can thereby acquire knowledge [...] Understanding *cannot be transmitted* in that way. (Zagzebski 2008, pp. 145–146; emphasis added.)

Hills famously defends a similar view; it applies specifically to moral understanding, but it is tempting to read her as taking it to be generalizable to other domains as well:

If you are attempting to gain knowledge, testimony can serve as the justification for your own belief, but it is not usually a good way of acquiring [...] understanding. Understanding why p will not – *cannot* – have the same relationship to testimony as knowing why p. (Hills, 2009, pp. 19–20; emphasis added.)

Many authors, however, have tried to show that this simply cannot be all there is to say on the matter.<sup>1</sup> The reason is that it is undeniable that understanding, like knowledge, has a social dimension. We understand things better with the help and guidance of others than we would do alone. Think of cases in which you are confused or puzzled, maybe because you are having a hard time making sense of something, and you need to “phone a friend” who has more insight than you. You ask her something – such as: *Why is this particular thing the way it is, and not otherwise? Can you explain it to me?* – with the rational expectation that she will help you, given her better (i.e., deeper, broader, more systematic) understanding of the matter. If things go smoothly, you will hang up with your puzzlement alleviated or even amended. Or think of teaching and learning contexts. We would not describe teaching as the filling of students’ heads with facts, and we would not describe learning as the accumulation of more facts by accepting what one is told. Teaching is (or ideally should be) a matter of providing others with insight. And learning, on the other hand, should be a matter of gaining such insight. It is true that sometimes, despite a teacher’s effort and goodwill, the attempt to convey understanding fails, but sometimes it succeeds.

It is tempting to say that this social dimension of understanding does not sit well with the standard view. That we learn from one another, and that we sometimes gain understanding from testimonial interactions with other epistemic agents, does not need to be argued for. It is a fact. It is a common, widespread phenomenon that we observe in our epistemic practices.<sup>2</sup> How can one reasonably claim that understanding *cannot* be acquired via testimony?

On closer inspection, proponents of the standard view are not questioning the fact that understanding, like knowledge, has a social dimension. They agree that testimony has a role to play in advancing understanding in our fellow speakers and in spreading understanding within our epistemic community. They thus admit that testimony can be *among the factors* that somehow lead to understanding. If the standard view is happy to say these things, what *is* its core idea? The following quotation from Zagzebski may lend insight:

Understanding cannot be given to another person at all except in the *indirect sense* that a good teacher can sometimes recreate the conditions that produce understanding in the hopes that the student will acquire it also. (Zagzebski 2008, pp. 145–146. Emphasis added.)

What Zagzebski is saying is roughly this: The best that other members of the epistemic community can do is to lay the groundwork, or to recreate the condi-

1 Such as Gordon (2017), Boyd (2017), Grimm (2020) and Jäger (2016). See also Malfatti (2019).

2 It is actually more than this; it is something that we want to happen. However, I will not argue for this claim here.

tions for understanding via testimony, but there is no guarantee that understanding will ensue. While knowledge can be second-hand, understanding is claimed to be an epistemic achievement credited mainly to the individual epistemic agent. As far as knowledge is concerned, I can easily “inherit” an epistemic achievement made by someone else. Someone else has done all the epistemic work, and I can enjoy the results. When understanding is at stake, things are different. To understand, I need to roll up my sleeves and do the epistemic work myself. No one can understand something for me.

Taken this way, the standard view (henceforth: SV) is committed to the following claim:

SV     Whereas testimony can *transmit* knowledge, it can never transmit understanding, but merely *foster* it.

In what follows, I discuss the three main arguments that have recently been formulated in support of the SV and will show that they can be all resisted.<sup>3</sup> The first appeals to a difference in the *cognitive effort* involved in acquiring understanding on the basis of testimony, which is allegedly absent from the process of gaining testimonial knowledge. The second argument appeals to a certain type of *epistemic trust* that is supposedly characteristic of knowledge transmission (and maybe of the transmission of epistemic goods in general) and that is allegedly absent when understanding is at stake. The third argument aims to show that there is a certain aspect of understanding (what epistemologists these days like to call “grasping”) that cannot be passed on to another person in the same way that one would pass on knowledge or isolated items of information.

Although I will not provide a positive argument for the claim that understanding can be transmitted via testimony, my analysis will cast doubt on the SV. Adherents of the SV seem to presuppose a highly demanding conception of what it takes for an epistemic good to be transmitted via testimony. They maintain that, for an epistemic achievement to count as transmitted, it must be epistemically grounded on testimony *exclusively*, i.e., on a speaker’s act of assertion and on nothing else. If my analysis in this article is on track, however, such a demanding conception makes testimonial knowledge either extremely rare or impossible. Yet if we opt for a more liberal conception of transmission, which acknowledges that the hearer always has at least *some* epistemic merit when she successfully receives an epistemic good from a speaker, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that even epistemic achievements other than knowledge, such as understanding, can be “transmitted” too.

3 The first argument has already been persuasively challenged by Boyd (2017) and Grimm (2020), but I plan to criticize it in a slightly different way.

## 2. Cognitive Effort

We are told that acquiring knowledge on the basis of testimony is – or at least can be, and most of the time is – an easy and straightforward process in which very little can go wrong. Suppose that a knowledgeable, trustworthy, sincere speaker tells me that  $p$  and that I form the corresponding belief on the basis of her telling. In the absence of defeaters for  $p$ , this will be enough for me to come to know that  $p$  as well.<sup>4</sup>

Yet when understanding is at stake, so we are told, things are different. Gaining understanding on the basis of others' words is usually a less straightforward process in which much can go wrong and in which, no matter the effort and goodwill in play, there is no guarantee of success. To support this claim, adherents of the SV typically point to an asymmetry in the way in which knowledge and understanding are acquired on the basis of testimony. Imagine a trustworthy, sincere speaker, they suggest, with a very deep understanding of a phenomenon or subject matter. She might be an expert relative to a certain domain, or someone enjoying significant epistemic superiority relative to her interlocutors. Suppose this person does her very best to share her understanding with her hearers. She provides them with explanations. She shares with them all the data and information that she judges to be relevant to the topic or phenomenon in question. The hearers, for their part – who, we assume, have no defeaters for what they are told – do not hesitate to take on board all the information that the speaker provides them with. It seems nevertheless that the hearers may fail to gain understanding as a result of this process. Even a trustworthy speaker with deep understanding of a phenomenon or subject matter might easily fail to bring her interlocutors to understand this phenomenon or subject matter too.<sup>5</sup>

Why? The best explanation, so the adherents of the SV claim, is that understanding is cognitively demanding, or at least *more demanding* than knowledge. Baumberger et al. (2016, p. 3) express this as follows: “Knowledge may easily be acquired through the testimony of experts; understanding, by contrast, seems more demanding and requires that the epistemic agent herself puts together several pieces of information, grasps connections ...”.

4 This builds on Lackey's *Transmission of Epistemic Properties Thesis* (TEP-S): “For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, if (1) A knows (believes with justification/warrant) that  $p$ , (2) B comes to believe that  $p$  on the basis of the content of A's testimony that  $p$ , and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that  $p$ , then B knows (believes with justification/warrant) that  $p$ ” (Lackey, 2008, p. 39). An endorsement of this thesis can also be found in Audi (1997), Fricker (1987) and Coady (1992).

5 Here is how Gordon (2017, p. 298) puts it: “It's always an open question whether the hearer attains understanding, given facts about (i) what defeaters the hearer lacks in conjunction with (ii) facts about the reliability/competence of the speaker, and (iii) facts about what the hearer believes which the speaker says.”

Hills (2009) famously makes a similar point about moral testimony. We can easily gain moral knowledge – i.e., we can come to know *that* an action X is wrong, and even *why* an action X is wrong – merely by trusting a moral authority on the matter. *Understanding why* an action X is wrong, on the other hand, is harder. To achieve this, we need to grasp the relevant subject matter. As Hills (2009, p. 101) puts it, we need a certain “systematic grasp of morality”. Now, if understanding is always cognitively demanding, and if most of the work needed for obtaining it must be performed by the hearer herself, it does not make sense to talk of understanding being “transmitted” or “second-hand”, in the sense of being appropriately based or epistemically dependent on testimony. By gaining knowledge from a speaker, we take an epistemic achievement that someone else has already attained. The SV says that this never happens in the case of understanding. Understanding is always a subjective achievement mainly credited to the hearer. They thus conclude that understanding cannot be transmitted. The way towards understanding can at best be paved or facilitated.

Here, then, is how an argument against the possibility of understanding transmission might look (call it the *cognitive-effort argument*):

- P1 An epistemic good cannot be transmitted from a speaker to a hearer if its acquisition requires a significant amount of cognitive effort on the hearer’s part.
- P2 The acquisition of understanding always requires a significant amount of cognitive effort on the hearer’s part.
- C Understanding cannot be transmitted.

In what follows, I show that this argument can be challenged. Following Boyd (2017) and Grimm (2020), I suggest that the reason why this argument may seem compelling at first sight is that it draws on the wrong – or better, a biased – kind of example: namely, examples of *easy knowledge* and *hard understanding*. Once we consider cases of *hard knowledge* instead, we realize that even acquiring knowledge from others can be, and often is, cognitively demanding. This is enough to shed doubt on P1. Once we consider cases of *easy understanding* (as Boyd, 2017, calls them) instead, we realize that P2 is questionable too.

Suppose, then, that a knowledgeable, trustworthy and sincere colleague from the Department of Theoretical Physics tells me that “we cannot observe a superposition because of the phenomenon of decoherence.” I trust her blindly as far as physics is concerned, so I take her word for it. If one were to ask me why a superposition cannot be observed, I would have a (very

probably) true answer to hand, even reliably so. But would I come to *know* the fact in question? Would I gain *knowledge* about why a superposition cannot be observed?

Intuitions might diverge, but it is tempting to answer that, supposing that I know and understand close to nothing about quantum mechanics, I would not. The reason strikes me as simple: by saying that, when knowledge transmission is at stake, we form the belief that *p* “on the basis of someone’s telling us that *p*”, we oversimplify and gloss over important complexities in testimonial interactions. What the speaker offers to her hearers via testimony is not a proposition. It is an assertive utterance, i.e., a piece of verbally expressed information that her hearers need to process – that they need to make semantic sense of. This might sound trivial to most readers, but the consequences for social epistemology are crucial (and as far as I can tell are sometimes overlooked). As hearers, we do not – indeed, *cannot* – have direct access to the speaker’s mind. We are always confronted with language, i.e., with speech acts and utterances. However, we do not believe utterances; we believe their *contents*. How do we gain access to the content of an utterance? We do so via semantic interpretation. Those who agree that knowledge that *p* requires access to the content that *p* will also agree that acquiring testimonial knowledge requires at least (correct) semantic interpretation. So, we might conclude, even the acquisition of testimonial knowledge sometimes requires a certain amount of cognitive effort on the hearer’s part. This is enough to cast doubt on P1.

P2 can be questioned as well. To see why, consider a case of easy understanding. Imagine that you ask your friend, “Why haven’t you submitted your article on time?” and she answers, “I had the flu. You know, when I have fever I tend to hallucinate, and I wanted to avoid writing nonsense.” In a case like this it seems that, on the basis of your friend’s telling, you would come to understand *why* she did not submit her article on time. Note that she is not just telling you “I had the flu”. In such a case, your understanding would probably depend in a very minimal way on her testimony, as you would arrive at the explanation mainly by yourself. You would embed the information “my friend had the flu” in your overall understanding of how feeling sick and having headaches or low blood pressure might prevent one from writing a proper article. The case I depict here is different. The understanding you gain *crucially* depends on your friend’s testimony and on the information that she is giving you about what exactly happens when she feels sick. This is not something that you could have figured out by yourself given your background knowledge and understanding.<sup>6</sup> Still, contra P2, the amount of cognitive effort involved in understanding why your friend hasn’t

6 Thanks to Catherine Z. Elgin (personal communication) for making me appreciate this point.

submitted her article on time is minimal. (See Grimm, 2020, for more examples of easy understanding.)

Adherents of the SV might reply that my analysis, and in particular my criticism of P1, just misses its target. Even if the amount of cognitive effort involved in gaining testimonial knowledge can *quantitatively* resemble the amount required for gaining understanding, they might reply that there is still a difference in terms of *quality*. Suppose that we add a “semantic interpretation requirement” to the picture. Take again our knowledgeable, trustworthy and sincere speaker telling us that *p*. Suppose that we do semantically understand the speaker’s utterance and hence succeed in forming the corresponding belief on the basis of her telling. In the absence of defeaters for *p*, as above, we will typically come to know that *p* as well, and this is the end of the story. It can still be argued that the case of understanding is different. To gain testimonial knowledge, the hearer must do *something*; but what she must do to acquire understanding is qualitatively different. In the case of understanding, the hearer must grasp connections herself, put together multiple pieces of information, embed the information she receives into her cognitive corpus, activate previously achieved understanding, and the like; in the case of knowledge, by contrast, she must merely assign words the right meaning. Adherents of the SV might thus respond by trying to fine-tune the cognitive-effort argument above along the following lines (call this argument *cognitive-effort\* argument*):

- P1 An epistemic good cannot be transmitted from a speaker to a hearer if achieving it requires the hearer to grasp connections and put together multiple pieces of information by herself.
- P2 Acquiring understanding always requires that the epistemic agent grasps connections and puts together multiple pieces of information by herself.
- C Understanding cannot be transmitted.

Yet this argument, in particular P1, can be challenged too. To see why, consider again the utterance above about superposition and decoherence. One clearly needs extremely complex conceptual tools to make sense of an utterance like this. To know what a superposition is, and what happens when a system decoheres, one needs to know and maybe even to *understand* a great deal of quantum mechanics. There is no way to assign to “superposition” the right meaning without activating one’s overall understanding of the relevant subject matter. This tells us something important: namely, that hermeneutical or semantic understanding and other forms of understanding, such as *objectual* understanding (i.e., understanding directed at a certain subject matter), are not always independent of one another. Often, the lines between them are fuzzy. Or consider a simpler case. Suppose that my history teacher

tells me that “the National Constituent Assembly sentenced Louis XVI to death in 1793”. What must I do to make sense of such an utterance? What must I do, for example, to assign the right meaning to “National Constituent Assembly”? I need not only activate, but must also make proper use of, my previously achieved understanding of the French Revolution. This process may require some reasoning. I might not immediately recall whether the representatives of the clergy and the aristocracy were members of the assembly, and I might need to go back to the events related to the Tennis Court Oath to find out. I might need to remind myself why the assembly was called “constituent” in the first place. What was the assembly supposed to constitute? What was its function? It seems that concepts such as “grasping” and “putting together several pieces of information” would fit very well in a description of what is going on in my mind while I am making sense of my teacher’s utterance. If this is right, and if we agree that I do receive knowledge from my teacher despite the effort of semantic interpretation on my part, P1 of the cognitive-effort\* argument must be rejected. Grasping connections and putting together multiple pieces of information is compatible with the transmission of epistemic goods.

Let me summarize. We have seen that acquiring knowledge from others is sometimes easy and sometimes hard. The same seems to hold for understanding. This tells us that one cannot appeal to a difference in the quantity of cognitive effort involved in acquiring knowledge and understanding to defend the SV. Nor is it promising to appeal to a difference in the *quality* of the cognitive effort involved. The reason is that knowledge transmission requires correct semantic interpretation, which in turn requires – at least in some cases – activating and making proper use of one’s understanding of the relevant subject matter.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Trust

I will now turn to the second argument. Some adherents of the SV claim that knowledge transmission – and maybe even the transmission of every other epistemic good – requires a certain kind of epistemic trust, which is allegedly problematic for understanding.

Consider the following example:

You know that an elephant is taking a bath in the lake (call the proposition that you know *p*) and you tell me “*p*”. I find this claim odd, and I check from the window. I then see the elephant. As a result, I come to know that *p* as well.

<sup>7</sup> Note that I do not aim to defend the view that the background conditions for acquiring knowledge and understanding are exactly the same. My aim in this paragraph is merely to show that between knowledge and understanding – i.e., between the ways in which each is acquired on the basis of testimony – there are more similarities than is standardly assumed. See Croce 2019 for a similar view.

Clearly, we would not describe the knowledge I gain in this example as “testimonial”. There is no transmission of knowledge happening here. The reason, it seems, is that I am not trusting you about whether *p*. Upon your telling me that *p*, I go to the window and check. It is interesting to notice that the new knowledge that I gain has been crucially *influenced* by your testimony. You guided my perception. You caused me to go and see the elephant from the window. I would not have seen it if you had not told me that it was there. But all this seems irrelevant for the epistemic status of my new belief. The point is that my knowledge is not second-hand; I am not taking it from you.

Consider now a different case:

You know that an elephant is taking a bath in the lake (*p*) and you tell me “*p*”. Although I find this claim somewhat odd, I trust you, take your word for it, and form the corresponding belief on the basis of your testimony. As a result, I come to know that *p*.

The knowledge that I gain here is certainly testimonial. Knowledge is transmitted from you to me. What is the difference between the two cases? It is that, in the second case, I am epistemically trusting you. I am using your telling as a reason to believe *p*. Epistemic trust, then, seems to play an essential role in the testimonial transmission of knowledge. In order to receive the knowledge that *p* from a speaker, one needs to epistemically trust her about whether *p*. But what does it mean exactly to trust someone epistemically about whether *p*? Keren (2014, p. 2600) tells us the following:

[B]y inviting us to trust her about *p*, a speaker purports to provide us with both evidence for *p* and a preemptive reason for belief: that is, with a second-order reason for not forming our opinion regarding *p* on the basis of our own weighing of certain other evidence that may be available to us.<sup>8</sup>

As Keren construes trust, it is incompatible with “taking precautions”.<sup>9</sup> In the epistemic case, this amounts to “declining to rely on evidence for the testified proposition, instead relying solely on the testifier” (Keren, 2020). It is important to highlight that epistemically trusting a speaker on *p*, according to this view, involves not only refraining from gathering new evidence relevant to *p*; it also involves *disregarding one’s existing reasons* (for and against) *p*. I may already have reasons for or against believing that there is an elephant currently wandering

<sup>8</sup> See also Elster (2007) Zagzebski (2012) and Keren (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Keren (2014, p. 2605) suggests the following example to support this idea: “A shop owner might leave her employee alone in the shop with a significant amount of money in the till while she goes out on some important errand. But if, before she leaves, she turns on the CCTV camera to monitor the employee’s movements, then she does not really trust him. Even if she believes that he is trustworthy, or is optimistic that he will not steal, and turns on the cameras just as a precaution, it would not be correct to say of her that she trusts him not to steal.”

through the city ( $p$ ). But if I were to use any of these reasons (that is, if I were to weight the evidence for and against  $p$ , perhaps even taking the fact that you believe that  $p$  as very strong evidence for  $p$ 's truth), I would be taking "epistemic precautions". I would not be trusting you epistemically about whether  $p$ . Epistemically trusting you about whether  $p$ , in contrast, allegedly involves basing my belief that  $p$  *only* on your telling me that  $p$ . Call this conception of epistemic trust *deference*.

Let us now add understanding to the picture. Is understanding compatible with deference? Can I gain understanding of or about the fact depicted by  $p$ , if I defer to a speaker about whether  $p$ ? The answer depends on how we characterize understanding. How to conceive of understanding is still an open question, but one feature seems uncontroversial: understanding requires appreciating systematic connections among elements of a complex whole, and/or gaining insight into how different items within a larger body of information depend upon each other. Here is how Jäger (2016, p. 180) spells out this intuition:

The dependence relations I am concerned with are support relations between reasons and doxastic attitudes [...] There is typically a web of reasons which is constitutive of the subject matter, and gaining insight into the epistemic dependence relations between these reasons and the degree to which they support certain propositions gives us understanding.

Suppose, as Jäger suggests, that you are trying to understand why dinosaurs became extinct. Suppose you believe that the extinction was due to massive volcanic eruptions. You consult an authority on the matter, and she tells you that the dinosaurs' extinction was probably due to a large asteroid hitting the earth. Suppose she is right. In adopting her view, you certainly improve your epistemic position: you improve your track record in believing truths. To make advancements in understanding, however, you need to do more than taking the authority's word for it. You need to appreciate *why* the authority believes that the asteroid hypothesis is correct. You need to see why the asteroid hypothesis is better grounded than other rival hypotheses. You need to learn why your reasons for favouring the volcanic eruptions hypothesis are bad, or deficient. The general idea is that by gaining insight into the web of reasons relevant to the extinction of the dinosaurs, you gain understanding about this fact.

If understanding is conceived this way, it is clearly incompatible with deference. By deferring to a speaker about whether  $p$ , you choose to disregard your own reasons for and against  $p$ . In the case of understanding, however, your reasons seem to play a vital role.

Here is, then, an argument against the possibility of understanding-transmission (call it the *epistemic-trust argument*):

- P1 For knowledge that  $p$  to be transmitted from a speaker to a hearer, the hearer needs to epistemically trust the speaker about whether  $p$ .

- P2 Epistemically trusting a speaker about whether  $p$  means *deferring* to her, i.e., disregarding one's existing reasons for or against  $p$ .
- P3 What holds for knowledge-transmission holds also for the transmission of every other epistemic good.
- P4 Epistemically trusting a speaker about whether  $p$  is incompatible with (advancements in) understanding about  $p$ .
- C Understanding cannot be transmitted.

There are at least two ways to challenge this argument. First, consider P3. Why should we accept it? Even assuming that deference, i.e., disregarding one's reasons for and against  $p$ , is necessary for the transmission of knowledge that  $p$ , why should it be necessary for the transmission of every other epistemic good? Is it not much more plausible that, by changing the epistemic good that is to be shared, the kind of trust involved will also change?

But let us nonetheless suppose that we have reasons to adhere to P3, and turn to P2. Here one might ask: even granted that acquiring knowledge from a speaker requires epistemically trusting her, is deference really the only possible explication of "epistemically trusting" a speaker about whether  $p$ ? Consider the following variation on our previous example:

You know that an elephant is taking a bath in the lake ( $p$ ) and you tell me "p". I remember seeing very large and odd tracks around the lake this morning. I come to believe that there is an elephant wandering through the city, both on the basis of your say-so *and* on the basis of the evidence I already have.

In this example, your testimony functions as evidence for me that is *added* to my existing pool of evidence. An important question is whether I *would have come to know* that there is an elephant wandering through the city on the basis of your testimony had I not seen the tracks on the shore this morning. Let us suppose that in our case, my memory of the tracks and your testimony are both necessary and jointly sufficient for my belief to reach the threshold of justification or confidence required for knowledge.

Am I epistemically trusting you in this case or not? If epistemic trust requires taking the speaker's word and disregarding all the reasons for and against the testimonial information, we are forced to say that I am not. But would this not be an odd result? The case would be different, of course, if I decided to go to the shore and check whether there are signs of the animal. But this is not what happens. I am using your telling as very strong evidence for  $p$ 's truth, and I am adding this evidence to other, inconclusive evidence that I already have. It seems to me as if, in doing so, I am indeed epistemically trusting you, at least to some extent. If this is so, then – contra P2 – it is possible for a hearer to epistemically trust a speaker about whether  $p$  while some of her reasons for  $p$  retain their epistemic function. And note that by

questioning P2, we shed doubt on P4 as well: understanding is certainly incompatible with deference, but it seems to be perfectly compatible with partial trust.

#### 4. Grasping

Let us turn to the last argument for the SV. It is widely held that understanding crucially involves, or is even reducible to, a certain act of “grasping”. Grasping, adherents of the SV claim, is a matter of having (and being in the position to exercise) certain abilities. Since abilities, at least *prima facie*, cannot be passed on to others in the same way in which one passes on isolated pieces of information or knowledge, it follows that there is at least one aspect of understanding that cannot be transmitted via assertions or tellings. Here, then, is a possible argument for the SV (call it the *grasping argument*):

- P1 Understanding crucially involves (or is reducible to) grasping.
- P2 Grasping is to be spelled out in terms of abilities and know-how.<sup>10</sup>
- P3 Abilities and know-how cannot be transmitted via testimony alone.
- C Some essential aspects of understanding cannot be transmitted via testimony alone.

In what follows, I will challenge this argument in two ways.

First, consider P2. Is the abilities-based account of grasping the best available option? Many prominent authors think it is. Grimm (2011, p. 339) conceives of grasping as a matter of “seeing how the different causal elements depend upon one another in our representation of the world”. He claims also that “on our proposal, ‘seeing’ or ‘grasping’ would count as a kind of ability, because the person who sees or grasps how certain properties ... are related will have the ability to answer a variety of ... ‘what if things were different?’ questions” (Grimm, 2011, p. 343). Elgin (2017, p. 33) defends a similar view. She suggests that “to grasp a proposition or an account is at least in part to *know how* to wield it to further one’s epistemic ends” (emphasis added). Elgin’s idea seems to be that grasping a proposition is a matter of being able to *use* the information in a certain way – e.g., as a basis for non-trivial inference, reasoning, and maybe even action (when

10 In what follows, I will assume that abilities and know-how amount to something over and above propositional knowledge. It should be noted, however, that some authors challenge this assumption. Stanley and Williamson (2001), for instance, defend the view that knowing how to *X* actually reduces to having some form of propositional knowledge. A subject *S* knows how to *X*, they claim, if there is some proposition *p* such that *S* knows that *p* is a way for *S* to *X* and *S* “entertains this proposition under a practical mode of presentation”. What “practical mode of presentation” refers to, however, is not so easy to spell out, and this seems to undermine the plausibility of Stanley and Williamson’s suggestion (see Hawley, 2010, on this).

one's ends are cognitive). Hills (2016) also defends an ability-based account of grasping. She writes that “when you grasp a relationship between two propositions, you have that relationship under your control. You can manipulate it. You have a set of *abilities* or *know-how* relevant to it, which you can exercise if you choose” (Hills, 2016, p. 663; emphasis added).

There are dissenting voices, however. Khalifa (2012, p. 6) claims, for instance, that the grasping involved in genuinely understanding, say, a phenomenon *P* is nothing more than having true, justified beliefs about the true or best available explanation about *P*. Roughly, we genuinely understand why *p* in that we know that some *explanans* is true, and that a certain explanatory relation between the *explanans* and the *explanandum* actually holds – and this is the end of the story. Khalifa (2017, pp. 14, 79) also contends that “talk of grasping can always be replaced by a more specific epistemic status (e.g., approximately true beliefs, [...], scientific knowledge)” and that “grasping isn't special. In no context is it anything more than scientific knowledge of an explanation – and in many contexts, it's substantially less”. The explication of understanding provided by Schurz and Lambert (1994) also suggests a non-ability-based account of grasping. Suppose that one conceives of understanding as bringing certain informational units to “fit into” one's system of thought relative to a certain subject matter or domain of reality. One could then say that when a subject successfully grasps a fact, she becomes aware of how the informational unit in question can fit into her system of thought (roughly: she is in the position to assign to this informational unit a proper position relative to everything else that she has good reasons to believe or to endorse about the relevant domain).

For present purposes it suffices to point out that there is no agreement on how to construe grasping. This, I believe, is enough to make P2 of the grasping argument at least suspect.

But suppose that one has reason to adhere to P2 – say, because one believes that the ability-based account of grasping is the best available option. Is it true that abilities and know-how cannot be transmitted via testimony, as P3 maintains? I suspect that many will find this thesis plausible or even compelling. Suppose that you ask your friend to teach you how to swim and he reacts by handing over to you his copy of Lynne Cox's book *Open Water Swimming Manual*. You will probably be upset, thinking that he is making fun of you. Learning by heart one of the best manuals on swimming while sitting by the pool is typically not the best way to learn how to swim. We thus have the strong intuition that, to gain an ability, a person must do more than just believe the (true) information that she receives. She needs to act accordingly on the basis of this information. Whether she succeeds in learning, however, is a matter of how hard she practises. Can this intuition be challenged?

I think it can. The reason why most of us are reluctant to give it up, I suggest, is that it draws once more on the wrong kind of examples. To see this, consider the following case.

I recently texted an Israeli friend to ask how to make the great shakshuka I had tried at her place. Here is what she texted back:

Cook the tomatoes and the onions until tender, add salt, pepper and cumin, then break the eggs above, do not stir, put on low heat and wait until the eggs are cooked.

Have I gained know-how (to make a shakshuka) on the basis of my friend's testimony? The shakshuka turned out all right (you will have to take my word for it, but in case you do not, follow the instructions yourself!), so I tend to say that I did.<sup>11</sup> If I am right, contrary to what we might initially think, we gain abilities and know-how all the time in our everyday testimonial interactions.

Adherents of the SV might reply that I am cheating. I might have learned how to make shakshuka, but this is *not essentially* on the basis of what my friend told me. The relevant abilities were already there to be displayed. I was already able to break eggs into a pan, cut tomatoes and onions, use a hotplate, and so on. All that my friend's testimony did – so the reply might go – was bring me to activate abilities that I already possessed. But this objection does not do justice to the shakshuka case. True, before asking for my friend's help I had already mastered the basic abilities necessary for cooking shakshuka. But isn't the ability that I gain on the basis of her instructions a *new one*? This new ability is probably grounded on some basic abilities that I already possess, but it does not plausibly reduce to these. It results rather from an appropriate combination of them. And here, in combining my basic abilities in the right way, my friend's instructions play an essential role.

I am aware that things are not so simple. Not every ability will be passed on as easily as the ability to cook shakshuka. But these reflections are enough to shed doubt on P3 – namely, on the claim that transmitting abilities via testimony is impossible *tout court*.

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11 It should be pointed out here that knowing-how is not an all-or-nothing matter. It admits of degree. I can be more or less skilled in cooking shakshuka. My shakshuka can turn out edible, decent, tasty or outstanding. I can be able to cook it properly just once, most times I try, or reliably so. I might reach a point at which I am able to explain to others how shakshuka is cooked, with a certain measure of flexibility and the capacity to deal with problems (*I used too much salt. What can I do?*). If we demand from knowing-how the capacity to reliably exercise an ability with the greatest amount of success, and maybe even the ability to teach others how to attain it, it might be that knowing-how is something that results only from a significant amount of practice. (Thanks to Heather Battaly for helping me appreciate this point.) I do not see why we should set the threshold so high, but in case we should, I would be satisfied with saying that testimony can trigger or yield a *certain amount* of knowing-how.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The SV in social epistemology holds that whereas testimony can *transmit* knowledge, it cannot transmit understanding, but can merely *foster* it. In this article, I have shown that the three main arguments in support of the SV face significant challenges.

The first argument appeals to a difference in cognitive effort between acquiring understanding and testimonial knowledge. I have shown that acquiring knowledge from others is sometimes easy and sometimes hard – and that the same holds for understanding. This tells us that a defence of the claim that understanding cannot be transmitted cannot appeal to a difference in the *quantity* of cognitive effort involved in acquiring knowledge and understanding. Appealing to a difference in the *quality* of the cognitive effort involved does not seem promising either. The reason is that knowledge transmission requires correct semantic interpretation, which in turn requires – at least in some cases – activating and making proper use of one's understanding of the relevant subject matter.

The second argument appeals to a certain notion of epistemic trust that is supposedly typical of, or even necessary for, the transmission of knowledge, yet is allegedly incompatible with acquiring understanding. My analysis shows that this argument can be resisted – either by challenging the assumption that what holds for knowledge transmission also holds for the transmission of every other epistemic good, or by challenging the claim that the transmission of knowledge always requires *complete* trust (i.e., deference).

The third and last argument aims to show that there is at least one aspect of understanding (the so-called “grasping” aspect, which is typically spelled out in terms of abilities and knowing-how) that cannot be transmitted via testimony alone. My analysis shows that this argument can be resisted as well – either by questioning the ability-based account of grasping, or by casting doubt on the claim that abilities and know-how cannot be directly acquired from testimony.

Adherents of the SV might respond, however, that my analysis misses its target.<sup>12</sup> Consider my analysis of the cognitive-effort argument. What I meant to show is that knowledge transmission can be hard. Adherents of the SV might argue that, at best, what I succeed in showing is that the class of situations in which knowledge is *strictu sensu* transmitted is much smaller than standardly assumed. If the information I receive from a testifier is complex, and if I need to activate my previous understanding of the relevant subject matter in order to obtain access to the content of her utterance, the knowledge that I eventually gain is simply not testimonial; I deserve some credit for it. Or consider my analysis of the epistemic trust argument. What I meant to show is that knowledge

12 Thanks to an anonymous referee of *Theoria* for pressing this point.

transmission is possible even when the hearer trusts the speaker merely to some extent. Adherents of the SV might argue that I misunderstand what they mean by “transmission”. If a knowledgeable speaker tells a hearer that *p* and some of the hearer’s reasons for *p* retain their epistemic function, the hearer simply deserves some credit for her new knowledge. Her knowledge is not, properly speaking, second-hand. In order for an epistemic good to count as transmitted, the reply might go, it must depend for its epistemic status *exclusively* on the speaker’s testimony. And this is precisely what seems to be impossible in the case of understanding.

Here is my response. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the cases of knowledge acquisition on the basis of testimony that I depicted in this article are not actually cases of knowledge transmission. Let us embrace the strict conception of transmission presupposed by this objection. Let us assume that, for an epistemic good to count as transmitted from a speaker to a hearer, the epistemic credit and responsibility need to be all on the speaker’s side.<sup>13</sup> If this strict conception holds, does *any* epistemic achievement – in particular any item of knowledge – count as transmitted? Suppose that I ask a passerby where the station is. He tells me, and I form the corresponding belief. The speaker is knowledgeable, and I take his word for it. As a result, I come to know where the station is. Note that I need do nothing particularly demanding to make sense of his utterance semantically, nor need I activate any of my background knowledge about the structure of the city. Would this count as a case of knowledge transmission? It might be argued that, if the strict conception of transmission holds, it would not. Where does the epistemic credit for the achievement in question lie? It is unquestionably shared between the informant and me. This is because, as epistemic subjects, we are (epistemically) responsible for our choice of informant. Our epistemic trust in a certain source of information must be grounded in a careful evaluation of the source’s reliability. If while wandering around the city looking for the station I asked a four-year-old child or a visibly drunk person to help me out, I would certainly be responsible, at least partially, for the false belief that I would (very probably) form. Similarly, it seems, if I choose my informants well, and if my epistemic trust in others is grounded in good reasons, I am at least partially responsible for the epistemic achievement that I gain.<sup>14</sup> It seems as if in virtually every situation in which knowledge is acquired as a result of a testimonial

13 Greco (2016, p. 484) calls such a strict conception of transmission “transmission\*”. He writes: “[In transmission\*] the hearer comes to know by being told, and seemingly in a way that relieves the hearer of the usual burdens involved in coming to know in nontestimonial ways”.

14 See Elgin (2017, p. 120): “If a contention’s defence consists of ‘They say so!’ backed by defensible reasons for thinking that their saying so is trustworthy, it is not a weak defence; it is a strong exercise of epistemic autonomy.”

interaction, the individual epistemic agent deserves at least some credit for the knowledge that she acquires.<sup>15</sup>

In light of this, we face a choice. Either we conceive of knowledge transmission as some sort of regulative ideal that is hardly ever instantiated in our epistemic practices, or we relax our conception of what it takes for an epistemic good to count as being transmitted. If we opt for the second road, we could take as essential for transmission the fact that testimony plays a robust and salient causal role in the acquisition of a certain epistemic good. If this more liberal conception of transmission holds, however, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that epistemic goods other than knowledge, such as understanding, can be transmitted – at least in those cases in which the speaker's testimony figures essentially in an explanation of how and why the hearer successfully acquires the epistemic good in question.<sup>16</sup>

So back to our starting question: can understanding be transmitted via testimony? The answer is: it depends. If the transmission of epistemic goods requires *full* epistemic dependence and *full* epistemic credit on the speaker's part, it cannot. If we acknowledge that, no matter how fundamental the role of testimony is, the epistemic credit for a certain testimony-based epistemic achievement is always shared between the speaker and the hearer, it probably can.

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15 On this point I agree with Riggs (2009, p. 215): “Why do we suppose that someone has to get all the credit? Why not just say that both the parties involved [testifier and recipient] get some credit for the recipient's true belief? It is vanishingly rare for any human being to accomplish anything completely on the basis of his own powers and abilities alone. And yet, even in many of those cases, we unhesitatingly attribute such accomplishments to people.”

16 This builds on Greco's (2010) idea that “credit attributions [...] involve causal explanations: To say that a person *S* is creditable for some state of affairs *A*, is to say that *S*'s agency is salient in an explanation regarding how or why *A* came about” (pp. 105–106).

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