

ANTI-ANTI-REDUCTIONIST CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE JUSTIFICATION OF TESTIMONIAL BELIEFS

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1. A dilemma

Anti-reductionists about the epistemic status (e.g. justification or knowledge) of testimonial beliefs² assume that some paradigmatic cases of testimony—more precisely, cases where the hearer has no precise information about the speaker—motivate their position. Consider the following quote from Lackey's *Learning from Words*:³

When I ask a stranger on the street for directions to the Empire State Building, do I have enough information about her to justify my accepting her testimony that it is six blocks north? Or, traveling to London for the first time, do I have enough evidence about a random British newspaper to adequately justify the beliefs I acquire while reading it?

This, to my mind, is a very compelling objection to reductionism.

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² The epistemic status we are interested in here is *justification*, not *knowledge*.

³ Lackey (2008: ch. 5).

Let us ask whether Lackey's type of objection against reductionism is in fact compelling. In particular, let us ask if it is compelling when it comes to epistemic justification. The objection would be, then: there are cases in which the hearer clearly lacks justifying information about the testifier and, yet, the hearer forms an apparently justified belief on the basis of the relevant testimony. Let us leave aside for a moment cases of testimony from *experts*—testimonial beliefs that are held in virtue of an attribution, on the part of the hearer, of expertise to the speaker on the topic of her assertion. The cases we are interested in (and the ones that are present in Lackey's objection) are cases of *testimony from strangers*—a more dangerous territory.

Consider the following disjunction concerning beliefs formed on the basis of testimony from strangers, in the type of scenario envisioned by Lackey: either (a) those beliefs are justified or (b) they are not. If (a) is the case (first *lemma*), then Lackey's case is compelling *only if* those beliefs are justified non-inferentially or, for that matter, only if those beliefs are justified in a way that differs from the one required by the reductionist about testimonial beliefs. If (b) is the case (second *lemma*), however, then Lackey assumes something that is actually false to be true. The anti-reductionist argument about testimonial justification does not get off the ground without the assumption that the target beliefs are justified.

Our considerations here will run as follows. The cases that are supposed to motivate anti-reductionism about the justification of testimonial beliefs are either cases of beliefs that are justified, but this can be properly explained by making reference to reasons available to the hearer, or they are not cases of epistemically justified beliefs at all. If that is the case, then maybe we have no good reasons to believe that the anti-reductionist view is true. That is, none of the disjunctions presented above, (a) or (b), seems to favour anti-reductionism.

Let us explore *lemmas* (a) and (b) in turn.

2. *Lemma* (a)

Here is a straightforward explanation why (a) is true (assuming that it is true): in the relevant cases of testimony from strangers, hearers form their testimonial beliefs *on the basis of good reasons*.⁴

Suppose Mabel is in Porto Alegre for the first time. She is hungry and she asks a stranger where she can find a restaurant. ‘See that stairs over there?’, the stranger asks Mabel, ‘You go up and you’ll see a restaurant on your left’. Mabel goes up the stairs and she finds a restaurant on her left—just as the stranger said. (Here is one way we can explain Mabel’s behaviour: after hearing what the stranger said, she thrust the stranger’s testimony; that is, she formed a belief that *There is a restaurant upstairs on the left*, or something along these lines and acted on it).

Now, it seems clear that Mabel has no specific information about that stranger’s authority on the location of restaurants in Porto Alegre—she does not know that the stranger is a reliable source of information about that issue. They never met before. For all she knows, the stranger can be a sincere, well-informed citizen as well as a liar, or maybe an evil epistemologist who is trying to fool people in order to lower the reliability of their testimonial beliefs in the actual world. But is Mabel totally deprived of good reasons to believe what the stranger said?

It is doubtful that this is the case: maybe as a result of being aware of the way the stranger answered her question (*plus* other background beliefs), Mabel believes that *It is highly unlikely that the stranger would answer her question so readily and with such a conviction if he did not know whether there is a restaurant upstairs*, and/or Mabel believes that *Probably that*

⁴ For a similar point, see Kenyon (2013).

stranger lives in Porto Alegre given his accent, etc. So Mabel's belief about what the stranger said may not be the only one that she forms as a result of being in the testimonial situation. And those beliefs plus Mabel's belief about what the stranger said may be good reasons for her to believe that *There is a restaurant upstairs on the left*.

Do these considerations indicate that Lackey-type considerations against reductionism are not compelling? It will depend on how we interpret the position called 'reductionism' here. Lackey herself seems to acknowledge that both can be true at the same time: (i) the justification of testimonial beliefs does not necessarily depend on inferential processes from other beliefs (more specifically, beliefs whose justification are non-testimonial) and (ii) the justification of testimonial beliefs depends on at least some positive reasons available to the believer. So, as long as we take reductionism to be a thesis according to which the justification of testimonial beliefs necessarily depends on *processes of inference* from other beliefs (beliefs whose justification are non-testimonial), then the Lackey-type objection to reductionism may look compelling.

However, reductionists need to require hearers to perform specific pieces of inference, maybe overly demanding ones, when they form their testimonial beliefs. It is sufficient for a reductionist to claim that the justification of the relevant testimonial beliefs *is not basic* (whatever that means), or that it depends on the epistemic status of further doxastic attitudes. If that is the case (under assumption (a)), we can conclude that although Lackey makes a compelling point against a certain interpretation of the reductionist view, perhaps she does not make a compelling point against *a better interpretation* of the reductionist view.

A good way to start fleshing out a better version of reductionism of this kind is to consider a Humean take on the issue of testimony. Adler (2012), along with a number

of epistemologists compares this view with a Reidian, anti-reductionist view: “Reid's position is that any assertion is creditworthy until shown otherwise; whereas Hume implies that specific evidence for its reliability is needed.” As Adler himself notes, we need not interpret the Humean position as stating that hearers must go out and check the credentials of the speaker, inquiring into his or her reliability concerning the relevant topic. Rather, it can be best interpreted as stating that the *presence* or *availability* of evidence or reasons for thinking that the speaker is reliable is necessary for one to be justified in believing the proposition expressed by the speaker's utterance. What seems to make for the contrast between Humeans and Reidians is that the latter ones, but not the former ones, claim that the absence of defeating reasons or counter evidence for testimonial beliefs is *sufficient* to make them justified.

(At this point someone could point out that the ‘better version’ of reductionism simply consists in a very trivial point: that justified beliefs have some sort of dependence on ‘background evidence’, or non-explicit reasons. But we should not think of background evidence as something of less importance, as if its presence was some sort of trivial condition for justification, on a par with conditions such as the one expressed by: *S* has a justified belief at *t* only if *S* is alive at *t*. The claim that *S* is alive at *t* does not raise the probability that *S* is justified in believing that *p* at *t* to a significant level, as does the claim that *S* has background reasons for believing that *p* at *t*.)

But even if inferences on the part of the hearer were required by the reductionist (in order for us to attribute justification to his/her testimonial belief), maybe we would have no good objection of the Lackey-type at the end of the day. Indeed, some authors⁵ would like to describe the

⁵ See Fricker 1995.

reductionist view as making exactly such a requirement. A reductionist need not assume that the relevant inferences are processes in which one *explicitly* entertains premises and derives a conclusion from them (perhaps also taking the premises to give support to the conclusion). Suffice it that the hearer has good reasons available (maybe not explicitly held ones) that in some sense ground one's belief in the proposition expressed by the speaker's utterance. (We can make sense of the relevant grounding relation in a number of ways—as a counterfactual dependence, as a non-deviant causal sustaining connection, etc.—but we need not delve into the details about this now.)

But even if the reductionist position requires some sort of inference on the part of the hearer, it would appear that some sort of *explanatory inference* may be plausibly assumed to take place in some of the relevant cases. The idea is that the hearer reasons roughly as follows when she accepts the testimony of a stranger:⁶

Stranger says '*p*' *because* she knows that *p* and she cared to inform me that *p*.

Again, this type of inference—like many 'automatic' or 'System 1' cognitive processes⁷—need not require the hearer to consciously and explicitly go through the relevant inferential steps. They can be instantiated effortlessly by the hearer, just like many other ordinary cases of reasoning by explanation (e.g., when one reasons as follows: Amanda is crying *because* Amanda is sad).

⁶ See similar proposals in Fricker (1995), and Malgren (2006).

⁷ See Kahneman (2011).

3. *Lemma (b)*

Blindly assuming that paradigmatic beliefs formed on the basis of testimony from strangers are always justified is not a responsible philosophical attitude. So let us submit that assumption to critical scrutiny.

Here is one consideration in support of the idea that many testimonial beliefs of the relevant kind are not epistemically justified: in many standard cases of testimony from strangers, the hearer actually has no good reasons or evidence for holding the testimonial belief, although that belief has some (yet to be specified) practical value to her. Here is another consideration in support of that idea: in many standard cases of testimony from strangers, the hearer does not actually form a *belief* toward the proposition expressed by the speaker's claim, but rather some (yet to be specified) weaker type of propositional attitude toward it. Let us consider each of these possibilities in turn.

We saw that Mabel believes that *The stranger said that there is a restaurant upstairs*. Call this her 'testimonial evidence'. We also saw that we can plausibly assume that Mabel also forms other beliefs as a consequence of hearing what the stranger said (and *how* he said it): beliefs whose contents may constitute good explanations why the speaker said what he said, or why the speaker said what he said in the way he did. If that is the case, it makes sense to suppose that Mabel uses those explanations to draw further inferences—e.g., that *There is a restaurant upstairs*.

It may be the case, however, that Mabel's testimonial evidence *plus* her explanatory beliefs constitute less than good reasons for her to believe that *There is a restaurant upstairs*. For one thing, the explanatory beliefs she forms may themselves be only weakly justified. For another, the support that her testimonial evidence *plus* her explanatory reasons confer upon the proposition that *There is a restaurant*

upstairs is possibly below the threshold required for epistemic justification (whatever that is).

If one were to follow this line of argument, one would need to explain why it is intuitive for most of us to think that paradigmatic testimonial beliefs are epistemically justified, despite the fact that they are not (that is, some kind of error-theory would be required here). Are there good explanations to that effect? Here is one candidate explanation: it is *practically rational* for hearers to behave as if what the stranger said is true—what the stranger said is what the hearer ‘has to go about’ in her practical decisions. E.g., as far as Mabel can tell, it is more likely that she will satisfy her practical goals (e.g., eating in a restaurant) conditional on her going upstairs—that is, conditional on her behaving as if what the stranger said is true (that *There is a restaurant upstairs*)—than it is conditional on her not so behaving. But this does not necessarily mean that she *believes* what the stranger said. She may rather believe it is likely or probable that the stranger is correct. Furthermore, it would be intuitive for us to attribute epistemic justification to Mabel's testimonial belief because it is actually practically rational for her to behave as if what the stranger said is true.

It is not at all implausible to assume that in most cases of testimony from strangers the hearer does not actually form a *belief* toward the proposition that was testified by the stranger. Maybe the attitude the hearer takes toward that proposition in the relevant cases is that of an *assumption*: she just assumes that what the stranger said is true and starts operating under that assumption. Or maybe the attitude the hearer takes toward that proposition in the relevant cases is that of a not-so-high credence. Or, as it was hinted above, maybe it is a belief about what is likely or not.

Here is a mark of belief: in general, when one believes that *p* one also has a disposition to answer ‘Yes’ to

a person that is interested in knowing whether p is the case. In most paradigmatic cases of testimony from strangers, however, the subject has only a disposition to answer: ‘Well, someone out there just told me that p —maybe he is right...’. Imagine that soon after hearing what the stranger said, Mabel is asked by another stranger whether there is a restaurant nearby. Would she firmly answer: ‘There is a restaurant upstairs’, as if she believed that proposition to be true? Probably not. She would rather tell the person that *someone just told her that there is a restaurant upstairs*. That much is believed by her—but that does not mean that she also believes that *There is a restaurant upstairs*.

There is another striking difference between attitudes of belief and whatever weaker sorts of attitude one may form in a situation of testimony from strangers. Although beliefs are revisable, they mostly persist when confronted with not-so-good reasons to believe the contrary, or even to suspend judgment about the relevant subject matter. If you actually believe that *The Comic Book Store is in the 7th Avenue*, say, because you have been there before and you know the names of the avenues, etc., then you will not stop believing such a thing when a stranger tells you that *The Comic Book Store is in the Road St*. Compare this case, however, to the one in which a stranger tells you that *The Comic Book Store is in the 7th Avenue* and, right after that, another stranger tells you that *The Comic Book Store is in the Road St*. In the latter but not in the former case, you change your attitude toward the proposition *The Comic Book Store is in the 7th Avenue*. That is because it is only in the former case that you really believe that proposition.

Conclusion

We conclude that, as long as anti-reductionists take those paradigmatic cases of testimony that we have been dealing with here to be their main motivation, they are in

trouble. *Lemma* (a) can be properly explained by a reductionist view and *Lemma* (b) is a dead-end for anti-reductionists.

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