

What's Wrong With Testimony?

Defending the Epistemic Analogy between Testimony and Perception

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Received wisdom holds that a great deal of what we know and justifiably believe we believe on the basis of testimony—on the basis of comprehending and accepting assertive utterances from other people (Hume 1748, section X; Bhattacharya 1994: 9; Sosa 1994: 59; Strawson 1994: 23; Fricker 2006b: 225-227; Lipton 2007: 240; Lackey 2008: 1).

One of the main questions for the epistemology of testimony—for the social epistemology of learning from others—is why do we acquire knowledge and justified belief, when we do, from comprehending and accepting the assertive utterances of others?¹ In this chapter I shall focus on the question of epistemic justification: why are our testimony-based beliefs—our beliefs based on comprehending (and sometimes even miscomprehending) what others assert (TBBs for short)—justified, when they are?²

As you might imagine there are a number of competing answers to our question. The two most discussed in the literature are *strict reductionism* and *presumptivism*.³ According to presumptivism, just as contemporary moderate foundationalists about perceptual justification hold that a subject enjoys a prima facie justification to transition from perceptually representing as of a particular as being a certain way to the belief that it is that way, presumptivism holds that a hearer enjoys prima facie justification to transition from

comprehending as of a speaker asserting that P to the belief that P. According to moderate foundationalism about perception, if it looks to Carol as if there is a blue sphere just out of reach, then Carol has prima facie justification to believe there is a blue sphere just out of reach. Analogously, according to presumptivism, if David comprehends Thomas as asserting that Aberdeen is north of Edinburgh, then David has prima facie justification to believe that the Granite City hovers above Britaine's other eye. This idea that there is such an analogy between testimony and perception goes back, at least, to Thomas Reid's 1764 work *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*.⁴

Strict reductionism rejects this epistemic analogy between testimony and perception: strict reductionism is presumptivism's historically significant rival. Strict reductionism holds instead that a hearer enjoys no such prima facie justification to transition from comprehending as of a speaker as asserting to the belief that P, even if a subject enjoys a prima facie justification to take perceptual states at face value. According to the strict reductionist, when it comes to testimony the hearer enjoys a prima facie justification to transition from comprehension as of a speaker asserting that P to the belief that P *only if* the hearer also possesses non-testimony-based prima facie justification to believe that the speaker's assertion is trustworthy. According to the strict reductionist, justified TBBs require non-testimony based reasons in favor of the trustworthiness of the speaker's assertion. Strict reductionism is standardly associated with David Hume's remarks on testimony from his famous chapter on miracles from section X of his 1748 work *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.⁵

This chapter is a defense of the epistemic analogy between testimony and perception as imagined by Reid. It's a defense, in other words, of presumptivism about testimonial justification. Though a popular view, it is not without its detractors. After spending the first half of the chapter spelling out presumptivism in a more detail, I will spend the remainder

responding to seven arguments against presumptivism. Evaluating the case for and against its strict reductionist rival will have to wait for another occasion.

Two Theoretical Frameworks

The presumptivist sees an epistemic analogy with perception: just as we are *prima facie* (defeasibly) justified in taking the deliverances of perception at face value, so too we are *prima facie* (defeasibly) justified in taking what other people tell us at face value.

As I have already noted, the analogous position about perception is frequently called moderate foundationalism. To elaborate on presumptivism about testimony, I shall first elaborate on moderate foundationalism. In particular, I will elaborate on two prominent theoretical frameworks that purport to explain why moderate foundationalism should be true. I will then use these two theoretical frameworks to formulate presumptivism.

The first theoretical framework goes by many names: *internalist foundationalism*, *internalism*, *mentalism*, *dogmatism*, and *cognitive essentialism*, among others (Chisholm 1966; Quinton 1973; Pollock 1971, 1974; Feldman & Conee 1985; Audi 1993; Pryor 2000; Cruz & Pollock 2004.). The general idea, according to this framework, is that there is something essential, intrinsic, or necessary to perceptual states such that, by their very nature, or in virtue of some other necessary facts, perceptual states confer *prima facie* justification on perceptual beliefs. That's just what they do, necessarily so. Some philosophers who fall within this framework take this to be a brute fact, not to be explained by further facts about perception. Other philosophers who fall within this framework see the possibility of providing an explanation for why perceptual states—usually conscious perceptual states—

have this power to confer prima facie justification. When it comes to specific details, there are many versions of the general idea, as the plurality of names suggests.

The second theoretical framework also goes by many names: *reliabilism*, *competence reliabilism*, *process reliabilism*, *virtue reliabilism*, and *proper functionalism*, among others (Goldman 1979; Sosa 1980; Plantinga 1995; Bergmann 2006; Lyons 2009; Greco 2010; Graham 2012, 2014; Burge 2013; Miracchi 2015; Kelp 2016; Simion 2019). The general idea, according to this framework, is that perception confers prima facie justification (partly) because taking perception at face value is a reliable route to true belief. It is because relying on perception leads to mostly true beliefs about the external world that our beliefs based on perception are justified. Philosophers who fall within this framework all accept this general idea, though they disagree on a number of important details, as the plurality of names suggests.

In the history of philosophy, these two frameworks were not competitors. That is because, in the history of philosophy, at least since Descartes if not long before, leading figures held that perceptual states, either by their very nature or in virtue of other necessary facts, are reliable representations about their subject matter. Perceptual states could then necessarily confer justification for they necessarily tracked their subject-matter, necessarily being good routes to true belief and knowledge. Descartes, for one, held that God's necessary existence and necessary goodness guaranteed that our perceptual states could not seriously mislead us about the external world. God guaranteed the necessary reliability of our perceptual states and perceptual beliefs. Berkeley's idealism and Kant's transcendental idealism also guaranteed the reliability of perception, necessarily so. For Berkeley and Kant, because the *objects* of perceptual beliefs just were patterns of perceptual states, taking various perceptual states at face value is necessarily a reliable route to truth belief. Various phenomenalist and positivist doctrines were similarly attempts to establish the necessary

reliability of perceptual representations, such that, necessarily, they contributed to prima facie justification for perceptual beliefs. Because perceptual states were necessarily reliable, they would, by necessity, confer justification on the beliefs they caused and sustained.

What do these frameworks say about “access” to the grounds of justification, and to their justifying force? Though traditionally introspective, self-conscious access to justifying grounds was taken for granted as a requirement on justification—at least for higher types of cognition—the issue of access is orthogonal to the issue of necessity (the internalist framework) and to the issue of reliability (the reliabilist framework). Both may require access or pass on an access requirement. And so I shall table the issue here.

By the latter third of the Twentieth Century the alliance between these two frameworks collapsed, for despite valiant attempts, leading philosophers finally recognized that it was not possible to establish that perception, by its very nature or in virtue of other facts, necessarily leads to reliable truth. God was no longer a linchpin in philosophy. Idealism and its phenomenalist successors fell into disrepute. With the dominance of realism about perception and the growing awareness since Darwin of the contingency of the reliability of our perceptual processes, philosophers largely gave up wedding our two frameworks.

Philosophers then had to make a choice between our two frameworks. When it came to advancing moderate foundationalism about perception, two camps then emerged in the wake of the collapse of the traditional merger of our two frameworks. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Roderick Chisholm, John Pollock and Anthony Quinton chose the first, internalist framework for moderate foundationalism. They were then followed by many others. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Alvin Goldman and Ernest Sosa chose the second, reliabilist framework. They too were then followed by many others.

The contemporary moderate foundationalist internalist thinks the following principle is true:

PERCEPTION-I. Necessarily, if a subject has a perceptual state as of a particular x as F, then the subject has a prima facie (defeasible) justification to believe that x is F.

According to PERCEPTION-I, it is an essential, intrinsic, or necessary feature of perceptual states, knowable apriori, that they confer prima facie justification on perceptual beliefs. It's just what they do.

The contemporary moderate foundationalist reliabilist, on the other hand, thinks the following principle is true:

PERCEPTION-R. Necessarily, if a (normally functioning) subject has a perception as of a particular x as F, formed on the basis of a (normally functioning) perceptual system that is reliable (in normal conditions when functioning normally), then the subject has a prima facie (defeasible) justification to belief that x is F.

According to PERCEPTION-R, when a perceptual belief-forming capacity or competence is a reliable route to truth, perhaps only contingently so, then it confers prima facie justification on the beliefs it forms and sustains.

We can now state two corresponding principles for TBBs—beliefs based on comprehending and accepting the assertive speech acts of others. The presumptivist internalist thinks the following is true:

TESTIMONY-I. Necessarily, if a hearer comprehends as of a speaker (a sender) as asserting that P, then the subject has a prima facie (defeasible) justification to believe that P.

According to TESTIMONY-I, it is an essential, intrinsic, or necessary feature of comprehending others as asserting that P, knowable a priori, that they contribute to prima facie justification for TBBs. It's just what comprehension as of the content and force of assertions does.

The presumptivist reliabilist, on the other hand, thinks the following principle is true:

TESTIMONY-R. Necessarily, if a (normally functioning) hearer comprehends as of a speaker (a sender) as asserting that P, formed on the basis of a (normally functioning) comprehension system that is reliable (in the hearer's normal conditions when functioning normally), and assertions are reliably true (in the hearer's normal conditions), then the hearer has a prima facie (defeasible) justification to transition from comprehension to acceptance.

According to TESTIMONY-R, when a capacity or competence to comprehend assertions is reliable and when the assertions comprehended are reliable, both perhaps only contingently so, then the transition from comprehension to acceptance confers prima facie justification for the beliefs so formed and sustained.

All four principles express the idea that a subject can have a prima facie justification to believe something through the operation of a psychological source without having independent justification to believe that the source is a reliable source of true beliefs, to believe that the subject is in normal conditions, or to believe that the source is functioning normally.

When it comes to perception, moderate foundationalism asserts that to have a prima facie justification from a perceptual state, the subject need not believe, nor have justification

to believe, that the subject's perceptual system is functioning normally, that the subject is in normal conditions, or that the subject's perceptual states are reliable guides to objects and their properties in the subject's normal external environment. Instead, moderate foundationalism holds that a subject has a defeasible right to presume that they are in normal conditions, functioning normally, and that the subject's perceptual states are reliable guides to external reality.

Similarly, when it comes to testimony, presumptivism asserts that to have a prima facie justification from a state as of comprehending a speaker to have asserted that P, the subject need not believe, nor have justification to believe, that the speaker or the hearer is functioning normally, that the speaker and the hearer are in normal conditions, or that assertion and comprehension are reliable routes to truth in the normal environment. Instead presumptivism holds that the hearer has a defeasible right to presume all of these things.

All four principles are about *defeasible* justification. The prima facie justification they postulate can be defeated by either rebutting (opposing) or undermining (undercutting) defeaters. You may comprehend someone to assert that Susan owns a dog, but you already know she doesn't have a dog. Or you comprehend Phillip to assert that pets have been outlawed on planes, but you have stronger justification to believe that he doesn't know what he is talking about. All four principles are entirely compatible with the possession of good reasons not to trust our senses on various occasions or to trust everything we are told by others. That's why the possession of defeaters for the trustworthiness of our interlocutors on various occasions is not a good argument for strict reductionism, for the possession of defeaters is compatible with presumptivism.

All four principles are "generativist" about justification. Just as the two perception principles see perceptual states "generating" prima facie justification for belief, so too the testimony principles sees comprehension as of assertions "generating" prima facie

justification. By having a perception, according to moderate foundationalism, the subject thereby possesses a justification to form a belief where the subject did not have one—at least not *that* one—before. Perception thereby “generates” prima facie justification. Similarly, according to presumptivism, a subject’s comprehension-state as of a speaker’s assertion that P confers (or contributes to) justification for the subject’s comprehension-based belief that P. By having a comprehension-state as of a speaker’s assertion that P, the subject possesses a justification to form the belief that P. Comprehension as of an assertion thereby “generates” prima facie justification.⁶

If we assume that comprehending as of a speaker asserting that P by its very nature confers prima facie justification on the corresponding belief that P, then TESTIMONY-I would be true. James Van Cleve (2006) attributes just this view to Thomas Reid, though I am sure others would interpret Reid as hemming closer to the Reliabilist camp (e.g. Plantinga 1995; de Bary 2001).

The distinction between the two frameworks shows that presumptivism is not strictly the same thing as TESTIMONY-I (/TESTIMONY-R), for one can be a presumptivist without endorsing TESTIMONY-I (/TESTIMONY-R). Just as internalism about perceptual justification is not the same thing as reliablism about perceptual justification, internalism about testimonial justification is not the same thing as reliablism about testimonial justification. And so it would be a mistake to suppose that presumptivism is true only if TESTIMONY-I is true, as Fricker (2002) and van Cleve (2006: 62-7) have done.

Tyler Burge (1993) and C.A.J. Coady (1992) seem to have defended a combination of TESTIMONY-I and TESTIMONY-R. For they have argued that comprehension as of assertive speech acts is necessarily reliable, or at least necessarily reliable in normal conditions, and that is why we are prima facie justified in taking the word of others at face

value. I won't rehearse their arguments here. Suffice it to say that I am not alone in finding their arguments ineffective.⁷

To my knowledge, very few philosophers have explicitly defended TESTIMONY-I. I defended a "weak" variant of the view in a 2006 paper "Liberal Fundamentalism and its Rivals" (Graham 2006a), where the apriori defense of weak presumptivism along internalist lines would be like C.I. Lewis's apriori defense of weak foundationalism about perceptual justification (Lewis 1929). I have since abandoned this position for a reliabilist alternative (Graham 2010). The majority of those who favor presumptivism seem to fall within the reliabilist framework.

For those who defend TESTIMONY-R, some explanation as to why assertive communication should be contingently reliable (in normal conditions when functioning normally) is called for. The reliability of assertive communication probably involves many factors: parental concern (we tell our children the truth), kin selection (we tell our close relatives the truth), the pursuit of mutual ends (we tell those we collaborate with the truth), direct and indirect reciprocity (we tell the truth to develop a good reputation for being trustworthy so as to influence others and to be invited to mutually beneficial collaborative efforts), social norms (we experience social pressure from others to tell the truth), and other aspects of gene and culture interaction and co-evolution (Graham 2012, 2015, 2019, 2020). Or maybe God designed assertive communication to be reliable, contingently so. That might be Reid's answer, as Alvin Plantinga has argued (1995). Because of our social nature (where only bees and termites seem to cooperate to higher degrees) we are strongly disposed to share (even when not requested) true information through assertive communication. Our ability to comprehend assertions (though it is not necessarily reliable), does lead to reliably true acceptances in normal conditions, reliably enough. That's why TESTIMONY-R is true.

You'll find such a view defended, for example, in my writings on the topic from 2010 to the present (e.g. Graham 2010, 2012, 2018c, 2019; see also Faulkner 2010, 2011; Simion and Kelp 2020; and Simion 2020). On this Reliabilist view, what's a priori is the general conception of justification as turning on the reliability of the belief-forming process in normal conditions when the process is functioning normally. What's contingent is whether assertive communication is reliable enough in normal conditions when functioning normally.

I hope I have said enough to convey the content of presumptivism. Should we believe that (at least one variant of) it is true? A very good reason for presumptivism would be a best explanation argument. On the one hand, TESTIMONY-I asserts that all TBBs are prima facie justified, necessarily so. While on the other hand, TESTIMONY-R asserts that all TBBs formed on sustained on normally functioning assertive communication that is reliable in normal conditions produces prima facie justified beliefs. So both have the explanatory power to explain why TBBs are prima facie justified, though TESTIMONY-I implies that all are prima facie justified (which, perhaps, some may not be) while TESTIMONY-R depends on substantive contingent truths about the reliability of assertive communication, which may in turn depend on sub-types of assertive communication. I leave these questions open. Why TBBs are ultima facie justified would then turn on the extent of our defeaters and our justified defeater defeaters.

Of course, fully spelling out a best explanation argument requires comparing all of the theories of testimonial justification on the market—something I will not pursue here. Instead I will discuss seven arguments against presumptivism. Though there are probably other arguments against presumptivism to be found in the literature, I find these to be the most common and influential. If these arguments fall short, then presumptivism should at least stay in the running as a candidate for the best explanation for the extent of our justified TBBs.

Seven Arguments Evaluated

The seven arguments are:

- The Argument from Reliability
- The Argument from Reasons
- The Argument from Possessed Positive Reasons
- The Argument from Possessed Negative Reasons
- The Argument from Agency
- The Argument from Psychological Force
- The Argument from Gullibility

I will show that they all fall short.

The Argument from Reliability

- P1. In normal conditions, perception is very reliable.
- P2. In normal conditions, testimony is less reliable than perception.
- C. Presumptivism is false (Lackey 2008: 190).

I think this is probably the most intuitive argument, the kind of argument we would find among the folk. Even so, it does not work.

First, the premises are clearly empirical. It would take empirical evidence to settle their truth. And that would invite investigating relevant classes for comparison. And once we

go down that path, it may be difficult to evaluate whether and to what extent testimony is less reliable than perception. Such an inquiry has yet to be done.

Even granting the premises, however, the argument is ineffective. It is a non-sequitur as it stands on either framework. First, on the cognitive essentialist (“internalist”) view of justification, the reliability of the belief-forming process, even in normal conditions, is neither here nor there. If we (justifiably) *believe* the process is not reliable *at all*, that would be an undermining defeater. But that would be a premise in a different argument, an argument soon to be considered.

Second, on the competence reliabilist view of justification, the fact that one process is more reliable than another is neither here nor there for whether either process is reliable enough (reliable enough in normal conditions when functionally normally, that is) to contribute prima facie justification. From the fact that perception is more reliable than testimony—if it is a fact—nothing follows about whether presumptivism is true or false (Graham 2006a).

A better argument would be this:

- P1. In order for a process to confer prima facie justification, it must be reliable *enough* in normal conditions. TESTIMONY-I is false, for it denies this requirement.
- P2. Testimony is not reliable *enough* in normal conditions. Hence TESTIMONY-R is false.
- C. Hence, presumptivism is false.

Are these premises true? P1 is question-begging against a cognitive essentialist. P2 is clearly empirical. If it were true it would undermine TESTIMONY-R. But it seems false. I shall give some reasons for believing that testimony should be reliable further along, reasons referring

to explanations for the reliability of testimony, and reasons to doubt the frequency of deceit. Furthermore, if P2 were true, we would know considerably less than we think we do on the basis of testimony, given a reliability condition on knowledge.

In sum, if we are internalists, reliability is arguably neither here nor there. And if we are reliabilists, TESTIMONY-R does not require that testimony is *as reliable* as perception, only that it is reliable *enough*. As it stands, absent what would be surprising empirical evidence for the truth of the second premise, presumptivism is on safe grounds. Though intuitive, the argument does not succeed.

The Argument from Reasons

- P1. Comprehending someone as having asserted that P is not a *reason* to believe that P.
- P2. One is prima facie justified in believing that P only if one has a *reason* to believe that P.
- C. Presumptivism is false.⁸

This argument is less intuitive, though I think some philosophers will immediately think it must be right. But it too does not work upon closer examination.

Suppose we read ‘reason’ to mean ‘a justifier for a belief.’ Then P2 is trivially true. But then P1 is just question-begging against the presumptivist, for both versions of presumptivism assert that a state of comprehending as of a speaker as of asserting that P is a justifier, either essentially or because of the reliability of testimony. Suppose on the other hand that we mean ‘reason’ narrowly to mean a specific kind of justifier, one among others. On this use, a perceptual state, for example, would not be a reason for belief, but still would

be a justifier. But then on this narrow use of ‘reason,’ though P1 might not be true, P2 is then false, for perceptual states can suffice for prima facie justification (either essentially or due to their reliability) without being a reason in this narrow sense. Either way the argument doesn’t work. It is either question-begging or invalid. At best it expresses one’s rejection of presumptivism. It doesn’t provide a good argument against presumptivism.

The Argument from Possessed Positive Reasons

- P1. By the time we are adults, if not before, we possess (or have possessed) considerable evidence in favor of the trustworthiness of our interlocutors, both “locally” and “globally.” We have good, or have had good, justification to believe that testimony is, for the most part, trustworthy (Fricker 2002; Shogenji 2006; Lackey 2008; Kenyon 2013).
- P2. If we have (or had) the justifying evidence in P1, then in order to account for the extent of our justified TBBs, we do not need postulate a presumptivist explanation for the extent of our prima facie justified TBBs.
- P3. If we do not need to postulate a presumptivist explanation for the extent of our prima facie justified TBBs, then presumptivism is false. Possessed reasons to believe that our interlocutors are trustworthy supplants (replaces, excludes) any justifying force postulated by presumptivism.
- C. Presumptivism is false (Fricker 2002).

First a note about P1. The reasons in P1 are either reductive reasons (reasons that ultimately reduce to entirely first-hand reasons to believe that testimony is reliable) or they are not. If P1 asserts that the reasons are exclusively reductive reasons, then we should be somewhat

doubtful that P1 is true. It is unlikely that we possess sufficient reductive reasons to justify the extent of our reliance on testimony (Coady 1973, Schmitt 1999, cp. Lyons 1997). If, on the other hand, many of the reasons that we possess are not fully reductive reasons, then many of the justified reasons we have for believing that testimony is trustworthy will come from the testimony of others, and so from TBBs that are not justified on the basis of reductive reasons. The justification for these further TBBs must then be explained. A natural move would be to explain their justification along presumptivist lines. Presumptivism would then be presupposed by P1. So if many of the reasons alluded to in P1 are not reductively justified, then the argument cannot reach its conclusion but would rather assume the falsity of its conclusion (Graham 2006b). Thus, for the argument to work, P1 would have to assume that we possess sufficient reductive reasons to account for the extent of our justified TBBs.⁹

P2 would then have to read “if we have adequate reductive reasons to explain the extent of our justified TBBs, then we would not need to postulate a presumptivist explanation.” I grant that this is true. But by the same token, if we possessed an adequate presumptivist explanation of our TBBs, we would not need an adequate strict reductionist explanation for our TBBs.

I reject P3. P3 in effect asserts that there cannot be more than one explanation, or more than one source, for the justification of a belief or a category of beliefs. P3 in effect asserts that “epistemic overdetermination” is impossible. I think we would all agree this is not true. Just as you can know introspectively that you have a headache, you can also know by seeing your grimace in the mirror, being told by another who sees your pain in your behavior, or through reading your brain scan. P3 is false (Graham 2006b; Burge 2013: 264).

Though this argument does not work, it has considerable appeal to many philosophers in the literature. I think the appeal is based on a mistake. I think many philosophers take presumptivism to be the view that we *lack* sufficient reasons to believe are interlocutors are

trustworthy, *therefore* we do not need those reasons to hold justified TBBs. But that would be to confuse an argument for presumptivism with the content of presumptivism. Presumptivism as such does not entail that we lack reasons—especially as adults—to believe that testimony is reliable. It does not even entail that we lack *reductive* reasons to believe that testimony is reliable. The point of presumptivism is that comprehension of assertive speech acts as assertive speech acts confers (or contributes to) prima facie testimonial justification. That force would be present even if the individual possessed a fully satisfactory first-hand reconstruction of all of his testimony-based beliefs through perception, memory and inductive reasons.

Similarly, though one argument for moderate foundationalism relies on the premise that we lack reductive reasons to justify our reliance on perceptual states, moderate foundationalism as such does not entail that we lack reasons—especially as adults—to believe that perception is reliable, both in general and in specific cases. It does not even entail that we lack reductive reasons to believe that perception is reliable. The principle is entirely compatible with the presence of such reasons. The epistemic force PERCEPTION-I or PERCEPTION-R entails would be present even if the individual possessed a fully satisfactory Cartesian reconstruction of all of her beliefs about the external world through introspection, memory and inductive reasons. The point of both principles is that perceptual states can confer (or contribute to) justification to form perceptual beliefs in the absence of such reasons.

The argument from possessed positive reasons does not give a good reason to believe that presumptivism cannot be true.

The Argument from Possessed Negative Reasons

- P1. On some occasions, and certainly not very frequently, we have rebutting and undercutting defeaters for our perceptual beliefs (negative reasons).
- P2. In the case of testimony, we very frequently possess rebutting or undercutting defeaters for accepting what we comprehend others to assert. We very frequently have justification to believe that what someone is telling us is false, or justification to believe our interlocutor is either incompetent (i.e. they do not know or have good reason to believe what they are saying) or deceptive (they are lying or otherwise misleading us) (Faulkner 2002; Fricker 2017).
- P3. If we very frequently possess rebutting or undercutting defeaters for relying on a source of beliefs, then that source of beliefs cannot by its nature confer prima facie justification (as per internalist essentialism) or cannot be reliable enough to confer prima facie justification (as per reliabilist approaches to justification).
- C1. Presumptivism on either framework is false. Both TESTIMONY-I and TESTIMONY-R are false. (P2, P3. P1 provides background contrast.)

To begin my reply to this argument, let me remind you of the distinction between *prima facie* and *ultima facie* justification, making use of the moderate foundationalist position on perceptual justification to illustrate. On the moderate foundationalist view, a perceptual representation confers prima facie, defeasible justification on a corresponding belief. If it looks like a red ball to you, then you have prima facie justification to believe that is a red ball. Sometimes you have further information that defeats your justification. Suppose you have information that a red light is shining on the ball. Then, absent further information about the lighting conditions, you are not ultima facie justified in believing that the ball is red. Prima facie justification means you have some evidence, reason, warrant or justification

to believe a claim. Ultima facie justification means, given all of your evidences, reasons, warrants or justification, you are all things considered justified.

This argument does not deny the distinction between prima facie justification and ultima facie justification. It allows, for example, that moderate foundationalism is true about perceptual justification. It just adds a condition on the existence of prima facie justification from a source of belief, such as perception (perceptual representations) or testimony (states of comprehending as of a speaker's assertion that P), namely the condition in P3. If we very frequently possess defeaters for taking a perceptual representation as of a particular as F, or a state of comprehending as of a speaker asserting that P, then perceptual representations or states of comprehending do not confer prima facie justification to believe that particular is F or that P is the case. To evaluate the argument then we need to ask whether its premises—P2 and P3—are true.

P3 finds intuitive support from other cases of belief-formation, such as wishful thinking or hasty generalization, for these are cases where we have standing beliefs that these influences on belief are unreliable, and we often rely on them (when we do) in the face of counter-evidence. So these are two cases where both the antecedent and the consequent of P3 is true.

P3 also finds support from the thought that if we very frequently possess defeaters (either rebutting or undercutting) against reliance on a source, then not only do we then have reason to believe that the source is unreliable, but it is also very likely to be unreliable. So if the antecedent of P3 is true for testimony (as P2 asserts), then it is at least very likely that testimony in general is not reliable enough to confer prima facie justification, as per the reliabilist approach to justification.

We are now in a position to evaluate the argument. Though P3 is vague (just how “very frequent” the defeaters must be is probably too hard to determine in many cases), let’s grant the premise for now. The question then is whether P2 is true.

I doubt P2 is true in the sense required to connect with the antecedent of P3. I doubt that we go through life talking to other people and finding ourselves confronted with an onslaught of defeaters, either rebutting or undermining, for a great deal of what they say. This is, however, an empirical question, and I am not aware of studies that try to determine the frequency of defeaters. We all have folk theories about the issue, and plenty of anecdotes from our own lives. But I am on the optimistic side of this issue. And though there are no *systematic* studies I know of on the overall question, there are studies on the frequency of lies and those who frequently lie. Though some people lie a lot, those people are rare (DePaulo et al 1996). And when it comes to those of us who are not frequent liars, we lie maybe once or twice a day, and when we do, we typically lie to ease social relations (Levine 2020). We say the stew our friend spent the entire day cooking for our benefit tasted much better than it actually did. We say our aunt’s dress is prettier than we really think. As for everything else, we lie considerably less often than our folk psychology would have us believe. Sincerity is the default, not deceit.

Some of the anecdotes philosophers trot out in support of P2 involve competitive situations (the proverbial used car salesman—but given the existence of lemon laws in many states, car salespeople are probably more honest than this folk example purports to illustrate) or communication systems gone awry, like social media platforms and other media on the internet. The curious thing about these cases, however, is that (a) they are easily avoided (how often do you buy a car, and do you really have to spend your day surfing social media?), and (b) the anecdotes are intuitive because we possess good reasons (if we do) for not believing people in these cases. Given (a), it is hard to believe that these kinds of cases

could show that testimony in general isn't reliable enough—or that we possess sufficient defeaters to believe that testimony isn't reliable enough—to confer prima facie justification. And given (b), all the cases really show is that in some cases (that come readily to mind), we possess defeaters for taking what we take others to say at face value. Given (b), these kinds of cases only show that our ultima facie justification for believing what others tell us in these cases is defeated, absent further defeater defeating information. Overall the kinds of cases often trotted out from the armchair either do not support P2, or do not combine with P3 in a way that would undermine presumptivism.

Presumptivism, in other words, is fully compatible with the idea that we should not always believe what we are told, and that we often need, in many cases, additional supporting reasons to believe what others tell us. The actual frequency of defeaters, I believe, is no reason to believe that presumptivism cannot be true.

The Argument from Agency

- P1. Perception is a reliable belief-forming process because of the laws of physics and psychological laws governing the perceptual system.
- P2. Forming reliably true beliefs on the basis of comprehending assertions depends on the reliability of testimony. An assertion by another is an intentional action and so a choice. Thus, for testimony to be reliable, speakers must choose to say what they believe on good evidence often enough.
- C1. Metaphysically, the reliability of perception relies only on natural laws, whereas the reliability of testimony depends upon choice (Faulker 2006: 149, 154; Lackey 2008: 189-190). (P1, P2)

C2. Presumptivism is false. (C1)

This argument as it stands is also a non-sequitur. C2 does not follow from C1. An intermediate premise is required:

P3. If a belief-forming process involves choice in the explanation of its reliability, then the process cannot confer prima facie justification on the beliefs it causes and sustains without independent reasons for believing that the source is reliable.

Given P3, along with P2, C2 would follow.

Once stated, it should be obvious that P3 requires argument. It is certainly not self-evident. Furthermore, on at least the assumption that moderate foundationalism about perception is true, P3 is false. First, imagine that the early modern philosophers like Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz and Berkeley are correct that God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, so that the continued constant operation of the laws of nature are the result of God's ongoing choices at every moment. Then it would follow that the reliability of perception depends on intentional agency and choice. It would then follow, by this premise, that perceptual belief cannot be a source of prima facie justification. Assuming moderate foundationalism about perception is true, P3 is false. Second, imagine that there are creatures in the universe that symbiotically depend on the choices of one to sustain the reliability of perception of the other. Then choice is involved in the reliability of perception. Again, for the same reasons, P3 is false. Third, reflect on all the ways that the reliable veridicality our own perceptual states can be affected by the actions of others or even actions of your own. You get the point. If moderate foundationalism is true, P3 is false.

What is really going on when someone infers from the fact that testimony involves choice to the conclusion that presumptivism cannot be true? I think they are really thinking two things. First, they are thinking about the reliability of testimony: testimony is less reliable than perception, for people sometimes intentionally deceive. Second, they are thinking about the frequency of defeaters: we often have a defeater for trusting an interlocutor--a positive reason to believe he or she might be lying--that we don't have in the perceptual case. But these points simply take us back to material we have just covered.

The Argument from Psychological Force

- P1. When forming a perceptual state as of x's being F, we automatically believe that x is F, or we are at least very strongly disposed to believe that x is F. The psychologically default response to a perceptual state is to form a perceptual belief. We experience a compulsion or force to take perceptual states at face value.
- P2. But when we comprehend a speaker as asserting that P, we are not strongly disposed to believe that P (a fortiori we do not automatically believe that P). We do not experience a compulsion or force to accept what we comprehend others to assert (Fricker 1994; Faulkner 2006).
- C. Presumptivism is false.

For this putative psychological difference to matter, it must be wedded to a principle that connects the psychology of belief-formation with an epistemological conclusion about when we are, and when we are not, prima facie justified in believing something. Otherwise

the argument is a non-sequitur. The following premise would work to make the argument valid:

- P3. A psychological process of belief-formation confers (contributes to) prima facie justification only if the process automatically or is strongly disposed to produce a belief (absent the possession and/or awareness of defeaters).

P3 combined with P2 would then entail that presumptivism is false.

Is P3 true? The converse is clearly false: if a process automatically or strongly disposes belief, that is not enough for those beliefs to be prima facie justified. Delusions, hallucinations, and other abnormalities may compel belief, but no one should hold that those beliefs are thereby prima facie justified. The same holds true for normally formed but automatically or strongly disposed beliefs that are rarely (if ever) true, even in normal conditions, at least by reliabilist lights. The subject may then be blameless, but the beliefs are not justified.

So is P3 true? Is the automaticity of belief-formation necessary for prima facie justification? That is not self-evident. An argument is surely required. It might even be false. Imagine that we acquired the ability to withhold perceptual beliefs (even without defeaters). Does that mean we would then need reductive reasons from introspection, memory and induction to believe that perception is a reliable source of information about the world? Hardly. So even if we can suspend belief whenever we can comprehend what someone tells us, even easily so, it would not follow that presumptivism is false. Even if the argument reveals a psychological difference between perception and comprehension, it does not reveal, without further premises yet to be stated, an epistemological difference.

What about P1 and P2?

I think there is a sense in which P1 is true and a sense in which it is not. It is true in that the transition from perception to (basic) perceptual belief is a passive, automatic process. But just as we do not always believe what we are told, we do not always continue to believe that things are as they appear. We can change our minds. In that sense the premise is false, or only a part of the whole story. Compare your experience of watching magic tricks or watching movies. Compare your experience of visual illusions in psychology textbooks or what your experience would be like in a well-constructed Ames room. In these cases, you don't believe your eyes. In these cases, you are able to change your mind or to withhold belief in the first place. Why? Because you possess defeating information. You know your experiences are illusions.

Could the same thing be going on in the case of testimony? Could we believe what we are told by default, or be strongly disposed to believe what we are told, but nevertheless have the power to suspend acceptance, especially given defeating information? If the answer to this question is yes, then P2 is as false as P1 is true.

There is a considerable body of empirical evidence on the psychology of understanding assertive utterances that suggests we are strongly disposed, and possibly even built by default, to believe what we comprehend others to assert, even if we are able to suspend judgment given defeating information or sufficient cognitive resources and motivation (Gilbert 1991; Gilbert et al 1993; Mandelbaum 2014; cp. Hasson et al 2005). Though research in this area of social psychology is still ongoing, it suggests that, psychologically comprehension and acceptance works an awful lot like perception and perceptual belief. If you disagree, you'll need to reply to this body of evidence.

Why might someone think that P2 is true when perhaps, given this body of empirical evidence, it might be false? Here is the answer. We do not always continue to believe what we are told, for many things of the things we were once told we do not presently believe. The

explanation for why this is so may be the same as for perception. We don't believe what we are told, when we don't, because we have defeating information. We either had a good reason not believe what we were told, or we've since acquired such a reason. So why would P2 seem true? It may seem true because we often have defeaters for believing that the speaker's assertion is trustworthy, or for believing what the speaker asserts. Given defeaters, we can either change our minds after automatically believing (or being strongly disposed to believe) what we are told, or perhaps even to suspend acceptance altogether in the first place. But this power is a power we also possess for perception. We would then have a parallel with the psychology of perception, not a difference, at the level of abilities. The only difference would then be the frequency of defeaters, a point we have addressed already.

The Argument from Gullibility

- P1. If presumptivism is true, then our TBBs are prima facie justified without assessing the speaker's assertion for trustworthiness.
- P2. If we do not assess the speaker's assertion for trustworthiness, we are gullible (easily duped or deceived) recipients of testimony.
- P3. If we are easily duped or deceived recipients of testimony, our TBBs are not even prima facie justified.
- C1. Our TBBs are prima facie justified only if we first assess the speaker's assertion for trustworthiness, so as to be not easily duped or deceived.. (From P2, P3)
- C2. Hence presumptivism is false. (From P1, C1). (Fricker 1994, 1995, 2006, 2017; see also Miranda Fricker 2007: 60-67).

There are three ways one might monitor for trustworthiness:

- W1. *Reasons for trustworthiness.* To assess a speaker's assertion for trustworthiness is to have independent positive reasons for believing that the speaker's assertion is trustworthy. To assess is to have positive reasons that sort out trustworthy from untrustworthy assertions.
- W2. *Sensitivity to defeaters.* To assess a speaker's assertion for trustworthiness is for a hearer's TBB to be ultima facie justified as a function of prima facie justification, rebutting and undermining defeaters, and defeater defeaters. Since a hearer should only believe what the hearer is ultima facie justified in believing, a recipient should not believe a speaker's assertion in light of undefeated defeating information. To assess is to respond differentially to defeating information, to not believe defeated assertions.
- W3. *Monitoring demeanor.* To assess a speaker's assertion for trustworthiness is to possess a reliable competence to detect perceptible signs (behavioral cues) of insincerity or incompetence in the speaker's demeanor and suspend acceptance. To assess is to monitor for observable signs of untrustworthiness in the speaker's overall demeanor.

Since these are all ways of assessing a speaker's assertion for trustworthiness, P1 is true only on the assumption that presumptivism does not require the hearer to assess the speaker's assertion in any of these three ways.

Now it is true that presumptivism does not require W1 (having reasons to believe your interlocutor is competent and sincere) for prima facie justification. That's just the point of presumptivism. What about W2 and W3?

Presumptivism requires W2 (sensitivity). Presumptivism does not allow us to just believe everything we are told, a point I've made already. If Barbara tells me she broiled three bison for breakfast on her birthday just to bother her brother, presumptivism entails I should not believe her, for I know that's terribly unlikely, no matter how much Barbara dislikes her brother. If a novice tells me that P on a complex topic, I have a reason to suspend judgment, even though the novice might be right. If a high-pressure salesperson dismisses my concerns, I should walk out the door. Cases where a hearer has a defeater for accepting a speaker's assertion may even be routine. We then need reasons to believe the speaker's assertion is trustworthy to defeat such reasons for *ultima facie* justification. Presumptivism thus entails we should not believe testimony when we possess undefeated defeaters. Presumptivism is not a license for acceptance in the face of defeating considerations; presumptivism does not dispense with the requirement that the hearer engage in epistemic activity altogether for *ultima facie* justification. Presumptivism requires W2. The argument then equivocates in P1. It is true in one sense of *assessment* but false in another.

What about W3 (monitoring)? Fricker thinks the letter of presumptivism rules out requiring W3. However, there is a case to be made for requiring W3 consistent with the spirit of presumptivism. Here it is. The point of W3 is to ensure that the hearer pick up on obvious defeating information. Since W2 normatively requires sensitivity to *possessed* defeating information, it is a small stretch to require a recipient to pick up on obvious defeating information. And once in the possession of the hearer, possessed defeating information is defeating information, and so falls under W2. That's one reason W3 is consistent with the spirit of presumptivism (see Goldberg and Henderson 2006). It is consistent with the spirit of

presumptivism for another reason, for W3 would not require that the subject possess positive reasons to believe that the speaker's assertion is trustworthy. W3 only requires monitoring for the presence of reasons not to believe the speaker.

So W3 (monitoring) is consistent with the spirit of presumptivism. But should we agree with Fricker in the first place that assessing the speaker in the sense of W3 is required in the first place? There is a folk psychological argument for W3. We can call it the *Argument for Monitoring*. It goes like this (relying on ideas we have already seen in the argument from possessed negative reasons):

- P1. Lying or misleading is extensive. People lie all the time. If we don't pick up on signs of deceptive intent and suspend belief as a result, we will be fooled all the time.
- P2. Lying well is hard. For example, liars can't look you in their eyes. Evidence of their deceit will leak in their demeanor.
- P3. It is then relatively easy to tell if someone is lying to you. We are good at telling when someone is lying to us.
- C1. Thus, if we monitor for signs of deceptive intent, we will not be easily fooled, and we will suspend belief when appropriate. Monitoring is easy, effective, and pays a high dividend.
- C2. There is then a requirement for prima facie justification of TBBs that we monitor for signs of sincerity (Fricker 1994, 2017).

If this argument goes through, we can see why a "license to be believe without monitoring demeanor" would be an epistemic disaster.

Although the first three premises are popular as folk epistemology (many philosophers advance them as truisms without wondering whether they might be false), they are known to be false. I've already cited evidence against P1. P2 also turns out to be false. There are very few good liars. Most people find it difficult (Levine 2020). Just try lying all day and see how it goes. P3 is very definitely known to be false. When it comes to detecting signs of insincerity, we aren't any good at it at all. For most people, lying effectively is actually much easier than you might think. And your ability to tell that someone is lying is really no such thing at all (DePaulo et al 2003; Bond & DePaulo 2006). We only think we are good at it because people hardly ever lie to us in the first place. We're not in the environment the argument thinks we are in, and we don't have the skills the argument thinks we need to get by in that environment. Insofar as presumptivism is a license to believe without monitoring demeanor for signs of defeat, presumptivism does not license objectionable gullibility.

The argument for monitoring is a non-starter as a conceptual argument. It is certainly not a priori true that monitoring is required. And then as an empirical argument, it relies on premises we have good evidence to believe are false. So even though the spirit of presumptivism is *consistent* with requiring monitoring demeanor for signs of insincerity, I doubt monitoring is a requirement for prima facie justified acceptance in the first place.

This concludes my discussion of seven arguments against presumptivism. Presumptivism provides a very straightforward explanation of the extent of our justified TBBs. But to provide the best explanation it must be better than its competitors. This chapter only partly advances that project, by showing that many common arguments against presumptivism fail to be effective.¹⁰

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¹ Epistemologists use ‘testimony’ for at least four things: the speech act of assertion (testimony as a broad category of speech acts); the evidence that the assertions of others provides for belief in the content of what is taken as asserted (testimony as evidence); a source or category of beliefs (beliefs based on comprehending the assertions of others: testimony as source); and the process from speaker’s assertion to a hearer’s belief, in both individual cases and for the practice of assertive communication (testimony as process). For discussion of some of these uses, see Graham 2016a, 2021, 2022. For discussion of ‘testimony’ as a name for a distinctive type of assertive speech act, see Graham 1997.

² In epistemology, ‘epistemic justification’ is frequently used broadly to consist in meeting a norm or standard understood in furthering truth and knowledge, a norm that is constitutively necessary for knowledge. I shall use ‘justification’ in this sense. On the assumption that knowledge entails justified true belief, but justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, explaining why our TBBs are knowledge (when they are) goes beyond explaining why they are justified (when they are). In other work I have focused on why are our TBBs are knowledge (when they are already justified true beliefs). See Graham 2000a, 2000b, 2006c, 2016b; Graham and Bachman 2019. See also Burge 2013 and Carter and Nickel 2014. Lackey’s (2008) book treats both questions at the same time. Wright 2019 is a recent monograph addressing knowledge transmission.

³ Other views about testimonial justification include *strict transmissivism*. On this view, just as memory preserves justification but does not generate justification for a belief, so too testimony transmits but does not generate justification. That’s the idea. Strict transmissivism denies strict reductionism and also denies presumptivism, for presumptivism

entails that comprehension as of another's assertion generates prima facie justification (see note 6). Authors sympathetic to transmissivism include Owens (2000), Schmitt (2006), Goldberg (2010, 2018), and Faulnker (2011), among others. Another view would be a coherentist view, for both strict reductionism and presumptivism assume foundationalism; coherentism would cut out the legs underneath these two positions. Fricker takes this approach (Fricker 1994, 1995, 2017). Another view would be Pritchard's (2004, 2006) *quasi-reductionism*, which attempts to split the difference between strict reductionism and presumptivism. Still another view would be John Greco's contextualism, where strict reductionism is true in some contexts but presumptivism is true in others, so to speak (Greco 2021).

⁴ I call it *presumptivism* (following Shieber 2015) for it asserts that we enjoy a "presumptive right" to take testimony at face value (see also Fricker 1994, 1995). A more common label is *anti-reductionism*. Unfortunately this phrase is ambiguous. In one sense it just means the same as presumptivism. In another it means any position (including presumptivism) that rejects strict reductionism. (That's how Greco 2021, for example, uses the phrase 'anti-reductionism.')

In this latter use, anti-reductionism encompasses views that reject presumptivism, as I understand it, for there are other views, like transmissivism or Fricker's so-called reductionism (Fricker 1994, 1995, 2017) that reject strict reductionism. I choose *presumptivism* to avoid this ambiguity. Another label is *credulism* (Pritchard 2004, 2006). Though it suggests the right to believe, the label is potentially misleading, given that 'credulity' in English means a disposition to believe too readily—a disposition to believe without justification, which is the opposite of its intended meaning. Other labels include *fundamentalism* (Coady 1992, Rysiew 2007), *liberal fundamentalism* (Graham 2006a), and *testimonial liberalism* (Jope 2021).

⁵The ‘reductionist’ label is due to C.A.J. Coady (1973: 149). Though *reductionism* is the most common name, there are others. Foley (1994) calls it *egoism*, Lyons (1997) calls it *inductivism*, and Schmitt (1999) calls it *individualism*. I call it *strict reductionism* to contrast it with Elizabeth Fricker’s (1994, 1995, 2017) broad use of *reductionism* to mean any view that rejects presumptivism (Fricker 2004, p. 125). On Fricker’s use of the term, you could then reject both presumptivism and strict reductionism, exactly as Fricker does in her own work (1995, 2017). Though she rejects presumptivism for adult TBB, she allows for something like presumptivism for children’s TBBs. And though she rejects presumptivism for adults, she does not require reductive reasons for adult justified TBBs, casting her overall view in more coherentist terms. See also Faulkner 2011. I chose *strict reductionism* to avoid this possible misunderstanding. I have discussed the details of strict reductionism in Graham 2018a and in work in preparation.

⁶ Presumptivism thereby rejects strict transmissivism about testimonial justification. On the other hand, presumptivism is compatible with the view that the total warrant a hearer enjoys for a TBB includes, as Burge (1993) would put it, the “extended body of warrants” – the force of the reasons or justifications that support or sustain the speaker’s belief or assertion. Presumptivism is then compatible with the view that some warrants are transmitted as well as generated, that the total warrant for a TBB might include both the hearer’s own proprietary warrants or justifications as well as the extended body of warrants or justifications. That’s why I call transmissivism *strict transmissivism*.

⁷ Coady's argument parallels arguments in the animal signals literature for the reliability of animal signaling (e.g. Maynard Smith and Harper 2003). For discussion of Coady's argument and related issues, see Graham 2000c, 2010, 2019, 2020. Burge's argument relies on purported constitutive connections between assertion, rationality and truth. For discussion of Burge's argument, see Graham 2018b.

⁸ I've heard this argument a number of times in conversation. For a discussion that comes very close to presenting this argument in print, see Pritchard 2004: 328-330.

⁹ Fricker takes a different line to explain why our beliefs in P1 are justified when not reductively justified. They are justified because of coherence with the rest (or with subsets) of our beliefs. Her embrace of coherentism thereby undercuts the foundationalist assumption shared by both strict reductionists and presumptivists. For Fricker's coherentism, see her 1995, 2017. I shall table coherentism here. For criticism of coherentism, see Olsson 2005.

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