

IS THE PRINCIPLE OF TESTIMONY SIMPLY EPISTEMICALLY FUNDAMENTAL OR SIMPLY NOT?

Swinburne on Knowledge by Testimony¹

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Abstract: The recently much discussed phenomenon of testimony as a social source of knowledge plays a crucial justificatory role in Richard Swinburne's philosophy of religion. Although Swinburne officially reduces his principle of testimony to the criterion of simplicity and, therefore, to a derivative epistemic source, we will show that simplicity does not play the crucial role in this epistemological context. We will argue that both Swinburne's philosophical ideas and his formulations allow for a fundamental epistemic principle of testimony, by showing that Swinburne has already implicitly justified the use of testimony as an epistemic source via his fundamental a priori principle of credulity.

Keywords: testimony, principle of credulity, presumption, internalism-externalism debate

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most central questions in epistemology is concerned with the possibilities of gaining and justifying knowledge. In this context an analysis of our epistemic sources is of major interest. If asked, 'How do you know that p?', common answers are 'Because I saw that p' or 'Because I remember that p'.

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Typically, philosophers distinguish between individual and social sources of knowledge. Perception, memory, introspection and reason belong to the first category whereas testimony is the only one dealing with the social aspects of epistemic processes. Due to this fact, Thomas Bartelborth has called the phenomenon of testimony “the division of epistemic labour”². The paradigmatic case of testimony is face-to-face communication. To put it in a nutshell: A person A tells another person B that p. Consecutively, B knows that p by A’s testimony.

One of the main controversial points in the current debate about knowledge by testimony consists in clarifying its epistemic status. Although most philosophers do agree that testimony is an indispensable source of information, there is no consensus whether it is also an independent and genuine source of knowledge. As it was said in the beginning, besides the fact that true beliefs about the world have their seeds in it the major criterion for identifying something as an epistemic source is its role in the process of justifying propositions gained by this source. Accordingly, some philosophers suggest that propositions gained by testimony cannot be simply justified by saying ‘I know that p, because X told me that p’. Rather the epistemic subject has to check the information by herself before the proposition can be taken as justified. The fear of being credulous in combination with a strong requirement to fulfil one’s epistemic responsibilities leads to this reductionist point of view: Propositions gained by testimony have to be reduced to the individual sources of knowledge for being justified.³

Contrary to this account, proponents of an anti-reductionist position want to ascribe the same epistemic status to testimony as to the individual sources of knowledge. They propose a presumptive rule as basis for the justification of beliefs gained by testimony. Elizabeth Fricker describes such a presumptive rule as follows: “We may call the thesis that there is such a defeasible a priori warrant—a presumptive epistemic right—to believe what one is told as such the Presumptive Right (PR) Thesis. The PR Thesis amounts to the thesis that a hearer is entitled to presume a speaker to be sincere and

² See Bartelborth (1996): 72.

³ Whether Swinburne is a reductionist in this classical sense or not will be discussed in section 3 of this paper.

competent regarding her subject matter, unless she has grounds to doubt this. To deny it is to insist that a hearer should not believe what she is told, unless she has empirical grounds for believing the speaker to be trustworthy.”⁴

In this context Richard Swinburne wonders whether we are in need of such an independent fundamental epistemic principle—a principle of testimony—for being justified in believing the words of others or not (See EJ, 123). As an alternative he suggests that for inferring the probable truth of an assertion we would rely on four criteria mentioned by him in connection with the task of theory choice, namely: a) yielding the data, b) coherence with background knowledge, c) scope and d) simplicity (See EJ, 80–83). Therefore, there are two different ways to justify beliefs received by testimony: Either our belief in the words of others is justified because of the four mentioned criteria. (In this case the principle of testimony would be derivative on these.) Or our belief is justified because the principle of testimony is a fundamental epistemic principle independent of the four criteria (See EJ, 123).⁵ Confronted with this choice Swinburne is arguing for the first alternative.

In his book “Epistemic Justification” he maintains that we do not need such an independent fundamental principle of testimony because “[...] it is plausible to suppose that the principle of testimony follows the simplest account of human verbal behaviour, given the ease with which we can attribute beliefs about the meanings of words to others on the assumption that they seek to tell the truth. There is no need, in order to provide justification for relying on direct testimony, to add the principle of testimony to our four criteria of correct explanation, as an additional criterion of probable truth.” (EJ, 126) We can summarise Swinburne’s argument in the following way:

- P1 The simplest hypothesis is the most probable true one (EJ, 82);
- P2 The simplest hypothesis about vast tracts of human verbal behaviour is that people are inclined to tell the truth (EJ, 125f.);

⁴ Fricker (2004): 118.

⁵ See also EG, 322, fn. 18: “[...] discussion of the issue of whether the Principle of Testimony is a fundamental *a priori* [italics by Swinburne] principle, or [our italics] whether it is a consequence of the application of other more fundamental inductive criteria to contingent evidence about what people say when.”

- P3 The simplest hypothesis about vast tracts of human verbal behaviour is that people do have true beliefs about the world (EJ, 125f.);
- C1 The most probable hypothesis is that people are inclined to tell the truth (P1/P2);
- C2 The most probable hypothesis is that people do have true beliefs about the world (P2/P3);
- C3 The most probable hypothesis is that people normally tell the truth (C1/C2).

If this argument is valid and sound no independent principle of testimony is needed. Therefore, we have to examine this argument closely: Each of the three premises can be called into question. The first one begs the question: Can the criterion of simplicity really be taken to be a reliable guide to truth?⁶ Concerning premise two and three it can be asked whether these are really the important, exclusive and simplest intentional aspects of communication. It seems as if people do show verbal behaviour for many different reasons: We think—contrary to what Swinburne is explicitly suggesting⁷—that one would need a very complicated theory for explaining such communicative acts as *asking a question, expressing thankfulness* or *praying* solely by the purpose of communicating true beliefs about the world.

Furthermore, even the case of testimony—understood in the philosophical sense as a source of knowledge—should be treated in a more detailed way. According to Jennifer Lackey, one has to make a distinction between testifying as an intentional act on the part of the speaker and using something as testimony for a certain proposition on the part of the hearer.⁸ Following this advice we can distinguish between two different conditions for identifying an act of testifying, namely: to exert influence on the belief system of the hearer and, respectively, to take the speaker's assertion that p as a kind of potential

⁶ As this topic has been analysed in more detail in “Simply False? – Swinburne on Simplicity as Evidence of Truth” (this volume), we are only pointing out this possibility of criticism without addressing the issue further.

⁷ “Any other explanation of the latter will, I suggest, normally be much more complicated—it will need to include some purpose for uttering the words other than communicating truth, and beliefs about the meanings of words varying with the speaker.” (EJ, 126).

⁸ See Lackey (2006): 187.

evidence that *p*. Of course, sincerity, i.e. to intend to communicate true propositions, is also a necessary condition on the part of the speaker. But, contrary to what Swinburne suggests, it is not the only one. Additionally, no epistemic source infallibly leads to true beliefs. The best that can be required is that the speaker intends to tell the truth but nevertheless may be mistaken. He can offer his assertion only as a case of potential evidence, not as veridical evidence.⁹ So, we can adhere to the fact that communication has many different functions besides telling the truth.¹⁰

Reading Swinburne's remarks on testimony it is surprising that he is addressing this topic in such a brief manner.¹¹ Even worse, it seems as if Swinburne does not hold a coherent view on this topic because seemingly contradictory statements concerning the epistemic status of testimony can be found in his works. To give an example: Whereas in his "Epistemic Justification" Swinburne writes: "However, there is no need to regard the principle of testimony as an independent epistemic principle dependent only on a fundamental assumption [i.e. a presumptive rule, NM/MS]" (EJ, 125), in "The Resurrection of God Incarnate" Swinburne claims instead: "It is a further fundamental epistemological principle [...] that we should believe what others tell

⁹ For this distinction see Achinstein (1978): 23.

¹⁰ A further difficulty consists in the fact that a testimony needs not solely consist in human verbal behaviour. Archaeologists for example do also regard potsherds or fossils as testimonies of ancient times. This is due to the mentioned fact that an epistemic subject can regard something as testimony independent of a correlative intentional act of a testifier. Swinburne treats evidence of this kind as "physical traces" instead of calling them "testimonies" (see RGI, 27). We think this issue is open to debate, as it is not quite clear which entities can be called *testimonies* in an epistemological sense. See e.g. Coady (1992): 48–53.

¹¹ When it comes to the topic of testimony Hume's discussion in his famous chapter "On Miracles" is of great importance for a philosopher of religion such as Swinburne. He is discussing the question about miracles with reference to Hume's arguments in more detail in *Miracles*, 320–328, in RGI, 17–26 and rather short in EJ, 124f. In EG, 322–324 he glances at testimony in relation to religious experiences. Nevertheless, testimony and its epistemic challenges and problems are not the essential points of his analysis.

us that they have done or perceived—in the absence of counter-evidence. I call this principle the principle of testimony.” (RGI, 12f.)¹²

So, the problem that concerns us here is how to deal with these different statements: Is the principle of testimony independent and fundamental or not? And what are the consequences of a positive answer to this question for Swinburne’s philosophy? In what follows we will first present three different possibilities how to handle the issue and critically analyse the most probable one afterwards.¹³

2 SWINBURNE ON THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF TESTIMONY

One obvious though admittedly not very interesting possibility is that Swinburne has changed his view about the status of the principle of testimony over time.¹⁴ This possibility, however, is very unlikely, since there are just two years in between his claim that the principle is a fundamental epistemological one and his different treatment of the principle in “Epistemic Justification”.¹⁵ A second possibility is to take the different statements simply as what they look like at first sight: We could claim that the statements are obviously con-

¹² See also *Existence*, 3: “And it is also a *basic* principle of rational belief which I call the Principle of Testimony, that what people tell you is probably true—in the absence of counter-evidence.” [our italics].

¹³ Of course, one can think of a fourth possibility in this context, namely that we should not take the use of the words *fundamental* and *basic* in the quotations above that seriously, because Swinburne uses the words unthoughtfully. According to this, he could simply delete these attributes in the quotations with no consequences for his arguments and if that was the case, we would recommend to do just this. However, this seems to be a very trivial and improbable possibility since Swinburne is famous for his concern to give clear, precise and thoughtful philosophical arguments for the rationality to believe in God.

¹⁴ This possibility is *prima facie* not unreasonable, because there are issues on which Swinburne has changed his opinion over time. So, for example, whilst in 1975 he claimed that “a proposition is *a priori* if and only if it is analytic and can be known as such” (*Analyticity*, 241) in 1997 he maintains that “the principle of simplicity is a fundamental synthetic *a priori* truth” (SET, 56). We will not dwell on this issue.

¹⁵ In fact, Swinburne in “The Resurrection of God Incarnate” refers uncritically to his discussion of testimony in “Epistemic Justification” (see RGI, 13 fn. 2).

tradictory and that we have detected a crucial incoherence in Swinburne's philosophy. That, most probably, is not the option Swinburne will opt for. And so—as a third possibility—we have to investigate whether we can interpret Swinburne's position concerning the epistemological status of the principle in a more charitable way, such that—contrary to our first impression—the different statements are compatible. This investigation is at the heart of the following sections.

2.1 *Psychological vs. logical inevitability*

In a footnote in “Epistemic Justification” Swinburne, commenting on C.A.J. Coady's account of testimony, distinguishes between two senses in which we can understand Coady's claim that there is an initial inevitable commitment to the reliability of testimony (see EJ, 125 fn. 35). If Coady's claim is supposed to be “a simple comment that young human children initially inevitably believe that others are telling the truth” (EJ, 125 fn. 35), *inevitable* will simply mean *psychologically inevitable* and Swinburne can agree with the claim. However, if we read *inevitable* in the sense of *logically inevitable*, the claim will assert that “children or anyone else require a separate principle of inference (from those we use in our inferences about the inanimate world) in order to make the step from the sentences that people utter to the truth of what they say” (EJ, 125 fn. 35). It is such an independent principle that Swinburne argues against in “Epistemic Justification”.

Now, with the help of this distinction between psychological and logical inevitability we can interpret Swinburne's different statements in the following way: Whenever Swinburne claims that the principle of testimony is a fundamental or basic epistemological principle, he means that it is psychologically inevitable to believe that others are telling the truth. It is a basic and fundamental principle in the sense that young human children initially inevitably believe in the truth of the words of others in order to learn the meanings of these words. However, that does not mean that it is logically inevitable to believe that others are telling the truth, in the sense that the principle of testimony is a basic and fundamental principle that is independent of the fundamental criteria of theory choice like simplicity etc. And that is exactly what Swinburne argues for in “Epistemic Justification”.

Though this possibility appears to constitute an elegant way out of the threatening contradiction, once we take into account the context of Swinburne's statement in "The Resurrection of God Incarnate" it becomes clear that this possibility of reconciliation between the statements is not open to him. Here Swinburne does not restrict the use of the fundamental epistemological principle of testimony to young children, but argues for the rationality of the use of the principle independently of a certain stage in language acquisition. This is absolutely plausible once we take into consideration the general theme of "The Resurrection of God Incarnate" because Swinburne uses the principle in order to show that there is reason to believe in the truth of the written testimony of the New Testament (see RGI, 27, 70). Thus by a restriction of the principle to young human children, Swinburne would rationalise the belief in the testimony of the New Testament only for uncritical infants—and that is surely not what he wants. Therefore, because Swinburne can refer to the distinction between psychological and logical inevitability in order to avoid the lurking contradiction only in danger of begging the question against the whole argumentation of "The Resurrection of God Incarnate", this possibility to reconcile the different statements is not open to him.

2.2 *Practical vs. epistemic reasons for the justification of our trust in testimony*

However, there appears to be another possibility for Swinburne to claim that the different statements are compatible. At the end of his account of testimony in "Epistemic Justification" he states "that all that I have been claiming in this section is that people do or can assemble evidence in the form of observations that they have themselves made that makes it probable that direct and indirect testimony is true." (EJ, 128) It is because of the possibility to assemble this kind of evidence that—according to Swinburne—we do not need to invoke an independent, epistemically fundamental principle of testimony in order to be justified in our belief in the words of others. However, he stresses that he is "not claiming that the beliefs of very many people [...] are based on such evidence." (EJ, 128) In fact, most people ground their belief that (for example) the Normans invaded Britain in AD 1066 on the basic belief that they have been reliably informed of this, and this—in turn—gives rise to the belief that it is true (see EJ, 128, 138). Therefore, in practise, we must justify

our belief that others are usually telling the truth by the principle of testimony. Thus, Swinburne emphasises that he does not beg the question “as to whether our belief that others usually tell us what is true needs this kind of support [i.e. the support of the principle of testimony, NM/MS], in order for us to be justified in using it.” (EJ, 123) So, to put the idea in a nutshell, though people epistemically do not have to rely on a fundamental principle of testimony, in their actual practise of justification they must rely on a fundamental principle of testimony in order to be justified in their belief in the words of others.

This proposal, however, obviously contradicts Swinburne’s own statements in “The Resurrection of God Incarnate”. There he explicitly claims that the principle of testimony is a “fundamental *epistemological* principle” (RGI, 12, our italics). By this he does not suggest that, because as a simple matter of fact we must rely on the principle of testimony, we are justified to believe in the truth of the written testimony of the New Testament. In order to be justified to believe in the truth of the testimony of the New Testament we need to rely on the principle of testimony epistemically. We would simply lack an epistemic justification of our belief in the words of others if we justify our use of the principle of testimony by referring to the factual inevitability of using it in our justification. So if Swinburne chooses the second purported strategy to avoid the lurking contradiction he would—in “The Resurrection of God Incarnate”—simply argue that we should believe in the occurrence of the resurrection because just as a simple matter of fact the only evidence we have of it is via written testimony;¹⁶ and this—surely—would be a very weak argument. Therefore, this strategy, too, is not open to him.

2.3 *Principle of testimony as an instance of the principle of credulity*

Finally, there exists a third strategy to avoid the threatening contradiction. In his account of basicity Swinburne introduces another principle of rational belief: The so-called principle of credulity. Swinburne uses different formula-

¹⁶ Swinburne explicitly grants, that today—as a matter of fact—written testimony is the only kind of evidence we have for the occurrence of the resurrection (see RGI, 27).

tions of this principle, and it is an interesting question whether these are equivalent or not. However, for the sake of simplicity of exposition we confine ourselves to the following formulation: According to Swinburne “what the Principle of Credulity affirms is that the very having of a basic belief [...] is itself evidence of the truth of that belief” (EJ, 144). This principle, of course, holds only in the absence of counter-evidence, because we are all familiar with the cases of optical illusions, where e.g. two lines seem to be of different length though in fact they are not. So additional evidence may decrease or increase the probability of the truth of the belief, but—according to the principle of credulity—the very having of a basic belief is *a priori* evidence of the truth of that belief. Therefore,—according to Swinburne—the principle of credulity “leads on to the view that the person with justified beliefs, the rational person, is the credulous person; she believes everything until she has reason not to do so.” (EJ, 142)

Now the third proposal to reconcile the different statements consists simply in taking this last claim seriously. If we really hold that the rational person believes *everything*—i.e. everything she sees, everything she remembers *and* everything she has been told—until she has reason not to do so, we—as Swinburne claims in “Epistemic Justification”—really do not need an independent fundamental principle of testimony, because we just need the principle of credulity in order to be justified that usually the testimony of others is true. The principle of testimony, in this sense, would simply be an instance of the principle of credulity. However, because of this very fact, it is also absolutely correct to claim—as Swinburne does in “The Resurrection of God Incarnate”—that the principle of testimony is a “fundamental, epistemological principle”, because it is just a special case of the *fundamental* principle of credulity.¹⁷ So the third strategy, to render the different statements compatible, is to claim that the principle of testimony is an instance of the principle of credulity.¹⁸

¹⁷ Swinburne explicitly claims that the principle of credulity is a “very fundamental” one (see EG, 326). In his first reply to our essay Swinburne granted that he takes the principle of credulity to be an ultimate and a priori principle.

¹⁸ By this we are not suggesting that we should simply attach another label to the principle of testimony (see EJ, 141, fn. 14).

Actually, we suggest that this third option is the most plausible one, so that Swinburne's different statements are compatible with each other. In this sense the principle of testimony is a "defeasible a priori warrant—a presumptive epistemic right" as Fricker has described the anti-reductionist conviction. In fact we would follow the general anti-reductionist account in suggesting a defeasible presumptive rule for every source of knowledge.¹⁹ A proponent of such an enterprise would argue for a very general presumptive rule of which special instances can be derived for every different epistemic source. Rephrasing one formulation of Swinburne's principle of credulity, such a general rule could be read as follows: *Believe everything—that is the outcome of the sources—until you have reason not to do so.*²⁰

Therefore, in Swinburne's line of reasoning we can find all the necessary components of an anti-reductionist account already implicitly included. We propose to develop these rudiments further.

Though this third option is a plausible one and though we find hints of it in Swinburne's account, we have to be clear that it is not an alternative Swinburne can wholeheartedly embrace. The first obvious point to make is that this last strategy contradicts practically everything that Swinburne claims in his treatment of the phenomenon of testimony. For Swinburne explicitly argues that we can justify our reliance in the testimony of others by the four criteria of theory-choice (see EJ, 126). Though this has the same consequence as the third option we proposed—namely that we do not need to invoke an independent, fundamental principle of testimony—, Swinburne's reasons for this desired consequence are absolutely distinct. The second, most crucial and decisive reason, why Swinburne probably would not accept our third option, however, is his thoroughgoing internalism. If we are internalists in Swinburne's sense that "a theory of the basing of a belief will be an internalist theory if the subject has *privileged access* to what are the grounds on which his belief is based" (EJ, 132, our italics), then we surely cannot treat the individual and the social sources of knowledge on a par. Since in the case of testimony we obviously do not have privileged access to what are the grounds on which our belief is based, the internalist has to justify the reliance on this source by

¹⁹ See e.g. Scholz (2001): 364f.

²⁰ See EJ, 142: "[...] she believes everything until she has reason not to do so."

the individual sources of knowledge—i.e. he has to choose a reductionist account.²¹ Therefore, if Swinburne chooses our third option, he would—by treating the individual and social sources on a par—endanger one of the cornerstones of his epistemology.

3 CONCLUSION

To summarise our argument: Swinburne's handling of the epistemic status of testimony is quite problematic—sometimes he claims that the principle of testimony is of a fundamental kind and sometimes he claims that it is not. It is remarkable that in the epistemological contexts he denies the fundamental status of the principle whereas when it comes to the justification of the cornerstones of Christian belief he seems to accept testimony as a genuine and independent source of knowledge. We think that this is an expression of an implicit tension between his internalist epistemology and the fact that one has to rely on the testimony of the New Testament for justifying Christian doctrines.

As a consequence of this, though epistemologically he opts for a reductionist theory, he cannot be a reductionist in the classical sense of being fearful of being credulous. But then we saw that although there are anti-reductionist components inherent in his theory Swinburne is not able to spell these out in the rigid texture of his internalism. So, it seems, to put it a little polemically, as if his position concerning the phenomenon of testimony is neither fish nor fowl in the debate about its epistemic status.

The upshot of all this is that we propose that at least in the case of testimony one should not ascribe the fundamental role of justification to the criterion of simplicity. Whereas in the process of theory choice the criterion of simplicity could play an important role, in the general process of belief formation we simply do not choose between theories. It seems as if Swinburne mixes up the conditions for theory choice and belief formation. But the dis-

²¹ This reductionist program is exactly the aim of Swinburne's treatment of testimony in „Epistemic Justification“: „[A]ll that I have been claiming in this section is that people do or can assemble evidence *in the form of observations they have themselves made* that makes it probable that direct and indirect testimony is true“ (E), 128 [our italics]).

inction between theory choice and belief formation in general should at least be regarded and in fact be emphasised.

In our opinion, Swinburne has implicitly noticed this crucial distinction. This assumption is supported by his use of the words “principle” and “criterion” in these different contexts. When it comes to the process of belief formation he speaks about *principles*—namely, the principles of credulity and testimony—whereas in the context of theory choice he prefers to argue for his four *criteria*, namely simplicity, yielding the data etc.

However, even if there are hints in Swinburne’s texts that he is aware of this distinction, he does not implement it strictly by his use of words. In his discussion of testimony he argues for its reliability “[...] in virtue of the *principles* discussed so far [...]” (EJ, 123) by which he refers to the four *criteria* of theory choice and he claims that we do not have to “[...] add the *principle* of testimony [...] as an additional *criterion* of probable truth” (EJ, 126, our italics). These statements with their lax use of the words *principle* and *criterion* clearly show that Swinburne does not pay enough attention to the crucial distinction of the different contexts mentioned above.

We suggest—as we emphasise in our third proposal—that he should treat the principles as kinds of presumptive rules. Though, we do not want to commit ourselves to a clear definition of the differences between the concepts of ‘principle’ and ‘criterion’, Swinburne could have solved the confusion in the choice of words. Presumptive rules are epistemic a priori principles with a posteriori defeaters.²² These defeaters are context-dependent. On the one hand sincerity and competence of the speaker are supporting and defeating criteria in the case of testimony in everyday contexts. On the other hand the criterion of simplicity might be one of these defeaters in the scientific context. The mixed status of presumptive rules could be responsible for Swinburne’s confusing use of the words “principle” and “criterion”, and also for his potentially contradictory statements about the status of the principle of testimony. Once we recognise this mixed status, there will be no need to reduce the principle of testimony to any of the criteria which are possible candidates for being a defeater in such a rule.

²² See Scholz (unpublished paper).

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