

What is the reductionist position as regards the epistemology of testimonial belief? Is such a view defensible, do you think?

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Testimony is a report of a certain state of affairs in speech, writing, sign language, or gesture.¹ According to the reductionist position as regards the epistemology of testimonial belief, testimony is not a direct source of justification and knowledge [SoK], but is rather derived from, and reducible to, more ‘direct’ SoKs, such as perception, inference and memory. A consequence of reductionism’s view of testimony as an indirect SoK, is that there is no presumptive right [PR] to trust it.² In this essay, I shall argue that reductionism faces the dilemma of being either unrealistic in terms of its epistemic demands, or too close to the direct view [DV] – according to which testimony is a SoK in its own right – to be properly distinguishable from it. On that basis, I will suggest, DV must be correct.

Reductionism about testimony follows from a commitment to epistemic internalism, according to which, for an agent to count as knowing, or justified in believing, a proposition, the grounds for doing so must be transparent to her. The reductionist approach is motivated by the thought that, because human beings are free and fallible agents, caution with respect to what they attest is required.³

Reductionism takes two forms: global and local. According to global reductionism [GR]⁴, any and all of an agent’s testimony-derived information (which, it acknowledges, generates the bulk of her ‘background beliefs’ about the world), can only count as knowledge if that testimony is reducible to other SoKs. Local reductionism [LR], in contrast, does not insist that *all* of an agent’s testimony-derived information must be reducible. It applies reductionism only to the content of an attestation made to the agent by a particular ‘speaker’ on a particular occasion.⁵

Against reductionism, DV holds that testimony is an irreducible SoK and, therefore, that we have PR to accept it just so long as there are no countervailing reasons for not doing so. Supporters of DV advance the ubiquity, and necessity, of humanity’s reliance on testimony in support of their thesis. In contrast to reductionism, DV sits comfortably with epistemic externalism, according to which an agent need not always be aware of the grounds for believing a proposition in order to know, or be justified in believing, it.⁶

¹ See Nagel (2014), p.77.

² See Bernecker (2006), p.94.

³ See Nagel (2014), p.79.

⁴ Traditionally associated with Hume’s stance in ‘Of Miracles’, Chapter X of his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Reprinted in Huemer (ed.) (2002), pp.221-238.

⁵ See Nagel (2014), p.78.

⁶ See Bernecker (2006), p.94.

A number of arguments have been advanced against GR.⁷ Most contemporary reductionists accept these as decisive, and put forward a form of LR instead. It is therefore on LR that I shall concentrate here, with particular reference to a paper by Fricker, 'Against Gullibility'.⁸ I take this defence of LR to be representative of LR in general.

As a local reductionist, Fricker accepts DV's claim that we gain much of our knowledge through testimony. The specific claim of DV that she thinks is false, is the 'Negative Claim' [NC] that 'It is not, generally speaking, possible for a hearer to obtain independent confirmation that a given speaker is trustworthy'.⁹ Against NC, Fricker advances the claim that it 'can be the case that' we have, 'or can gain', the independent resources required to assess trustworthiness.¹⁰ This claim, and her insistence that, where we can access and use these resources, we can only count as epistemically responsible if we do so, constitute the essence of her positive thesis.

Fricker makes clear that LR does not demand that a hearer assess a speaker for his overall trustworthiness, but rather only with respect to the particular subject matter on which he is pronouncing *now*.¹¹ This is important, for the obvious reason that (say) the corporate fraudster, or climate-change denier, who is the 'arbitrary' individual whom I happen to stop in the street to ask for directions to the nearest pub, may well be entirely honest and competent with respect to the directions he gives me. While I have a responsibility to assess him for signs of untrustworthiness – for example, by taking note of his facial expressions, speech patterns and gestures¹² – LR does not require me 'to conduct an extensive piece of MI5-type "vetting" of any speaker' to be justified in accepting what he says as true.¹³

This clarification of what LR is *not* claiming increases its plausibility somewhat. But there is reason to think its demands on a hearer are still too great. Fricker strongly emphasises the need for a hearer 'continually' to monitor a speaker 'for any tell-tale signs revealing likely untrustworthiness'.¹⁴ From a practical point of view, this requirement is problematic. A hearer's conscious attentional resources will be limited; thus, there is the danger that, in seeking to fulfil such a stringent epistemic demand, she may neglect to focus on the actual content of the testimony! Moreover, LR's epistemic caution might encourage those intent on dissimulation to get better at it, so that the caution becomes self-defeating.

⁷ These arguments concern (1) very young children's necessarily unquestioning reliance on the testimony of adults; (2) the fact that the acquisition of the very language in which attestations are made depends upon ready acceptance of testimony; and (3) the fact that there is no non-circular way in which GR can prove the 'in general' reliability of testimony (which it accepts). See Nagel (2014), p.81 and Huemer (2002), p.218.

⁸ Fricker, 'Against Gullibility' (1994). Here I rely on excerpts from that paper reprinted in Bernecker (2006), pp.95-106.

⁹ See Bernecker (2006), p.96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.99. This statement of the 'local reductionist claim' is circumspect to the point of being perplexing. It may well make holders of DV feel that this 'challenge' to their view is not much to worry about.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.99.

¹² See Nagel (2014), p.80.

¹³ See Bernecker (2006), p.104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104.

Fricker herself, it must be noted, is aware that LR may seem to place too great an epistemic burden on hearers. In order to minimise this difficulty – and, I am sure, because it is genuinely her view – she claims that most of the required hearer-assessment of a speaker may be, and ‘typically’ is, ‘conducted at a non-conscious...irretrievably sub-personal level’.¹⁵ An effect of the largely non-conscious nature of this assessment is that a hearer, if called upon to state her grounds for acceptance, or rejection, of testimony, may only be able to give an imprecise account of them, such as (to use Fricker’s own examples), the speaker’s seeming ‘perfectly normal’, or the hearer’s not liking ‘the look of him’.¹⁶

A question raised by Fricker’s move here is whether the avowed internalism of her position can sustain it. It is doubtful whether such vague notions on the part of a hearer as those she suggests, can legitimately count as internalistic ‘grounds’ for that hearer’s belief about whether a speaker is trustworthy. (Indeed, such attempted articulation of grounds bears an uncomfortable resemblance to expressions of prejudice in favour of, or against, a speaker.) Fricker’s claim is that such articulations, where they are made, are mere indices of what is, in fact, a more comprehensive justification for speaker-assessment.¹⁷ My interpretation of this (subtle) part of her argument is that (1) the precise terms in which a hearer might, ideally, express the grounds of her assessment of a speaker are opaque to her; but (2) the capacity to express herself in this ‘ideal’ way is not needed for the grounds of her assessment to be transparent to her in some largely non-verbal, perceptual-proprioceptive, sense.

Whatever the precisely correct interpretation of Fricker’s argument here may be, there can be little doubt that it stretches the definition of internalism a long way. It is almost as though the internalist conception of justification has been redefined so as to include the non-conscious processes needed to make LR plausible. It is thus difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in striving to avoid the charge that LR makes unrealistic epistemic demands on hearers, it collapses into a form of externalism; and that it becomes, in consequence, difficult to tell apart from DV. Fricker argues that what distinguishes LR from DV is the former’s insistence on ‘counterfactual sensitivity’ on the part of a hearer, such that, if there were ‘any signs of untrustworthiness, she would pick them up’.¹⁸ But the distinction she draws here is, I would suggest, unsustainable. DV’s PR to trust is the right to trust testimony in the absence of any evidence of untrustworthiness, not a blanket licence for a hearer to believe anything she is told, irrespective of any presenting reason to be circumspect. Thus, a sensitivity requirement is incorporated into the definition of PR itself. Moreover, that that requirement is not strong *enough* for the local reductionist, cannot by itself rescue LR; since the continuous monitoring of speakers that the approach demands cannot, if that monitoring is non-conscious (and so not ‘agent-directable’), coherently be insisted upon as an epistemic responsibility.

In the final analysis, then, I take it that a *bona fide* LR places too many demands on hearers to be workable or convincing; while attempts to moderate these

¹⁵ Ibid., p.104.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.104.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.104.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.106.

demands deprive LR of the very features that differentiated it from DV. I conclude, therefore, that DV must be correct.

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