

Marianne Talbot student essay comp: Michaelmas term 2024
3rd prize: Frank Roetker (USA)

Epistemology of Testimony: Reductionist vs Non-reductionist Positions

Testimonial knowledge is a core component of how we form beliefs. Without some reliance on testimony, we would be unable to learn about the world without direct interaction or observation – severely limiting our ability to procure knowledge, instrumental or otherwise. This is due to our being a singular entity as well as our time-bound lifespan.

After confirming the absolute need for testimonial knowledge in our lives, we may wonder where should we set the bar for rationally accepting the testimony of others. Clearly we wouldn't be considered rational in accepting any and all testimony, as we would open ourselves up to any swindler selling us a bridge. This is where the division of **reductionist** and **non-reductionist** positions stress opposing forms of acceptance criteria for rational belief in a third party's testimony based on other supporting or conflicting evidence about the third party. In this paper, I intend to explain why I find the reductionist position persuasive and defend it from rebuttals.

Let's set the foundation for this exploration by defining the difference between the reductionist and non-reductionist positions. Firstly, the **reductionist** position is primarily focused on *reducing* the testimonial knowledge to that of non-testimonial knowledge (Pritchard, 2018, p.79). The goal of this is to find non-testimonial knowledge with which to form the base of justification.

As for the **non-reductionist** position, a far more lenient acceptance criteria is offered for testimonial knowledge by removing the need for reducing testimonial knowledge to non-testimonial knowledge; however, there is the reliance on the safeguard that conflicting knowledge can rationally excuse denial of the testimony (Pritchard, 2018, p.81).

With these two positions established, what promise do I find with the reductionist side? I see this divide as a balancing act of the permissibility of accepting beliefs and I prefer to require a higher threshold before accepting beliefs. I would rather accept fewer beliefs but have the ones that I do accept be of a higher quality of alignment with truth. Along with these biases, I also believe that while people may tend to be honest, they also want to persuade towards their own interests. In this way, they may present narratives and accounts that benefit themselves or their interests. Hume appears to share the same concern: 'he may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best of intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting a holy cause: or even where this delusion has not place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in any other circumstances; and self-interest with equal force (1748, p.117-118).'

There are also the cases where people clearly lack any authority or knowledge in a subject such that forming an opinion based on their testimony could be hazardous. Multiple clear examples of this style of situation are conspiratorial thinkers who think that vaccines cause autism, 5G phone towers cause cancer due to the radiation, and my neighbor who thinks that 'smart water meters' (which I believe refers devices that measure water usage digitally) cause an immediate risk to our society (again presumably due to radiation). In these cases, opinions should be formed on the

research and testimony of experts in pathology or oncology. Furthermore, in the case of rouge experts who have dissenting opinions, it is important to continuously weigh the evidence as more is collected, as scientific revolutions may and have occurred throughout history such as the Ptolemaic astronomy, phlogiston theory of combustion, fluid flow theory of electricity, and continental drift (Ladyman, 2002, p.100). Scientific knowledge should never be accepted as infallible, but holds more credibility than my neighbor.

Despite those benefits, the **reductionist** position is definitely not without challenges. Thomas Reid (in Huemer, 2002, p217-218) argued that total reliance on inference to justify the credentials of a testimonial agent would limit the rationality of early stages of knowledge gathering. Specifically, children have very little foundational knowledge to quantify the reliability of testimony from adults. However, I see three potential issues with this rebuttal. First, there's no stipulation that the actions of children *are* rational; children partake in many irrational actions and lines of thinking before they have the opportunity to form coherent and rational thoughts. Additionally, we see this with the processes of scientific exploration, since there is also no requirement for the questions or experiments to follow rationally. As Ladyman puts it, 'the generation of scientific theories is not, in general, a mechanical procedure, but a creative activity (2002, p.74).' There is a period of exploration where data must be gathered and then rationally reviewed.

Second, I see this issue is largely analogous to the **Problem of Induction**, where the question of rationality is applied to any form of inductive inference due to the unknowable nature of if future events will conform to the observations of the past. Hume stated quite clearly that even with this problem, '[it] is certain that the most ignorant and stupid peasants – nay infants, nay even brute beasts – improve by experience, and learn the qualities of natural objects, by observing the effects which result from them (1748, p 39).' Despite there not being a conclusive answer to the **Problem**, there are pragmatic reasons to accept that it is rational to make inductive reasonings. I'd offer that Reid appears to end up with the same challenge, since appealing to experience for the stability on the trustworthiness and believability of other humans, what Reid (1779, p.237) calls *the principle of veracity* and *the principle of credulity*, forces the same **Problem**.

Third, there are many cases where a child *should* take hesitancy with the testimonial statements made by their parents. For one, parents are overwhelmingly going to impress on their children their personal religious beliefs through testimony. A vast majority of the world's population identifies by some form of a religion (Preston, 2024), which have mutually exclusive accounts of reality, meaning that they cannot all together be true; thus, statistically speaking, most parents that do impress upon their children religious beliefs are making testimonial claims that their child *should* be rationally hesitant to accept.

Another challenge comes from C.A.J. Coady (in Huemer, 2002, p218), in regard to the topic of language acquisition, '[if] some society regularly used the word "gnos" when in the *absence* of trees, it would not be correct to interpret "gnos" as meaning "tree."' Languages are not a universal, so even if one society doesn't use the word "gnos" as meaning "tree", it does not preclude any others from using "gnos" to mean "tree". Reid asks the same question, '[how] come we, then, to believe, and to rely upon it with assurance, that men, who have it in their power to do otherwise, will continue to use the same words when they think the same things? (1779, p.236)'

However, language does not live in the same realm as the physical; it's not something that we discover but we instead construct. Another way to see this is that it's not a universal truth that “gnos” doesn't mean “tree”, even if in the stated “gnos” example, it very well might not mean “tree”. There are plenty of examples in language where a word's meaning is not intended to be interpreted literally, such as in similes or sarcasm; in addition to the growth of a language; adoption of words from another language; or drift of the meaning of words. Furthermore, since shared language is something that is socially constructed, one could also argue that observation of the *usage* of words goes beyond mere testimony, but into the directly observable.

Nobody should question the pragmatic need for testimonial knowledge in our lives. In this paper, I have reviewed the differences between the **reductionist** and **non-reductionist** accounts for rational acceptance criteria, as well as the reasoning for my preferences on the topic. I wish to have elucidated some of the benefits for the **reductionist** account of testimonial belief and provided reasons for why the criticism does not sway me. As Hume said, '[a] wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence (1748, p.111).' I find myself ultimately in agreement with Hume, in that it is rational to proportion the value of testimony to the evidence of the third party's credibility on the subject in question.

Bibliography

- Coady, C.A.J. (1973) 'Testimony and Observation', in M. Huemer (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (2002). Routledge, pp. 239-249.
- Huemer, M. (2002) 'Testimony', in M. Huemer (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (2002). Routledge, pp. 217-218.
- Hume, D. (1748) 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', in P.H. Nidditch (ed) *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding And Concerning The Principles Of Morals*. 3rd edn. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 25-80, 109-131.
- Ladyman, J. (2002) *Understanding Philosophy of Science*, New York: Routledge, pp. 31-125.
- Leonard, N. (2023) 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E.N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/testimony-episprob/>. Accessed November 18th, 2024.
- Preston, C. (2024) 'List of religious populations.' *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/List-of-religious-populations>. Accessed: November 20th, 2024.
- Pritchard, D. (2018), 'What Is This Thing Called Knowledge?'. 4th Edition. New York, Routledge. p.77-85.
- Reid, T. (1779) 'Inquiry into the Human Mind', in M. Huemer (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (2002). Routledge, pp. 234-238.