ELIZABETH FRICKER

TESTIMONY: KNOWING THROUGH BEING TOLD

1. OUR SUBJECT: WHAT IS TESTIMONY?

The expression ‘testimony’ in everyday usage in English is confined to reports by witnesses or by experts given in a courtroom, or other formal setting. But in analytic philosophy the expression is used as a label for the process by which knowledge or belief is gained from understanding and believing the spoken or written reports of others generally, regardless of setting. In a modern society testimony thus broadly understood is one of the main sources of belief. Very many of an individual’s beliefs are gained second-hand: from personal communication, from all sorts of purportedly factual books, from written records of many kinds, and from newspapers, television and the internet. Testimony enables the diffusion of current news, information (or misinformation), opinion and gossip throughout a community with a shared language. It also enables the preservation and passing on of our accumulated heritage of knowledge and belief: in history, geography, the sciences, technology, etc. We would be almost unimaginably epistemically impoverished, without the resources provided by testimony in its various forms.

What are the philosophical issues concerning testimony?

When testimony is trustingly accepted by an individual, she acquires beliefs through it. In a modern society, very many of an individual’s beliefs are derived directly from testimony, or depend for their grounding on other beliefs so derived (see sect.8). Are these beliefs derived from testimony ever justified, and apt to be knowledge? The primary concern of philosophy regarding testimony is epistemological: to explain the status as potentially justified and knowledgeable of beliefs dependent on testimony. – Or, if the upshot is skeptical, to show why such beliefs are not apt to be justified and knowledgeable.

This primary concern involves, or overlaps with, others. First: Testimony as an epistemic kind needs to be more precisely delineated, and characterised (sect.2 below). Second: The acquisition of belief through testimony essentially involves understanding the content and force of a speech act made to one as audience (mutatis mutandis for written testimony) (see sect.2.). Thus in testimony we have a locus where epistemology interlocks with philosophy of language. Suppose we say that, strictly, the epistemology of testimony concerns the epistemic status of a hearer H’s belief that P, acquired through H being told that P by a testifier T, and H trusting T. (Call beliefs derived from and still grounded in such a source testimony-beliefs.) Still, our account of the epistemic status of testimony-beliefs must mesh with our account of a closely related matter: how it is that H understands what she hears,

what is involved in this, and if – as seems plausible – it entails knowing that she has been told by T that P, how this epistemic feat is achieved. Thus an epistemology of testimony needs to be complemented by an epistemology of understanding. Nor can the latter be completed, without a philosophical account of the nature of meaning. An account of how meanings can be known must interlock with an account of the nature of the objects of this knowledge. Third, an account of how beliefs derived from testimony can be justified, and knowledgeable, cannot be elaborated ad hoc. To convince, it must be the application to this case of a general conception of justified belief, and of the conditions for knowledge. Thus an epistemology of testimony must instantiate a preferred theory in general epistemology. We will see later that recognition of the ubiquitous dependence on past trusted testimony in our belief-system provides pressure towards a coherentist, not foundationalist, account of the justification of our empirical beliefs.

Returning to our primary project, this can be further specified and subdivided. Normative epistemology is one thing, and the plotting of the actual psychology of belief-acquisition through testimony, and the actual facts about the place of testimony-beliefs in our belief system, is another. Normative epistemology will tell us the conditions, if any, under which a belief acquired through testimony could and would be justified, and whether and how a belief system with extensive dependence on testimony can be so. Descriptive psychology will tell us what human belief acquisition through testimony is actually like, and what extent of dependence on testimony our belief systems actually exhibit. Given this distinction, we can divide our central issue about testimony along two dimensions, yielding four distinct questions to investigate, thus:

**Descriptive Local Question:** How do human hearers typically form belief in response to testimony? In particular, do they just trust their informant unthinkingly, blindly; or do they somehow (consciously, or sub-consciously) evaluate the informant for trustworthiness, and believe what they are told only if the evaluation is positive? (The process of testimony)

**Normative Local Question:** In what conditions, and with what controls, *should* a mature adult hearer believe what she is told, on some particular occasion? (Fresh instances of testimony, for an adult hearer.)

**Descriptive Global Question:** What is the actual place of testimony-beliefs overall, in a person’s structure of empirical belief? What is the extent of dependence on testimony for grounding (*epistemic dependence*) of our beliefs? And what is the relation between testimony and our other sources of empirical belief: perception, memory, and deductive and inductive inference from empirical premisses?

**Normative Global Question:** how, if ever, can a system of beliefs with uneliminated epistemic dependence on testimony be justified?

For a philosopher who is ready to accept skeptical conclusions, where they arise from her initial suppositions, these descriptive and the normative issues are distinct. But for one, like myself, who regards it as a datum to which our theorising is