WHY BELIEVE WHAT PEOPLE SAY?*

ABSTRACT. The basic alternatives seem to be either a Humean reductionist view that any particular assertion needs backing with inductive evidence for its reliability before it can rationally be believed, or a Reidian criterial view that testimony is intrinsically, though defeasibly, credible, in the absence of evidence against its reliability.

Some recent arguments from the constraints on interpreting any linguistic performances as assertions with propositional content have some force against the reductionist view. We thus have reason to accept the criterial view, at least as applied to eyewitness reports. But these considerations do not establish that any rational enquirer must have the concept of other minds or testimony. The logical possibility of the lone enquirer, who uses symbols and thereby expresses some knowledge of his world, remains open – but it is a question we have no need to pronounce upon.

The practice of accepting observation-statements is in fact extended to chains of testimonies believed to start in perception or in some other kind of justification, but the arguments for doing this are not so clear.

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Very often, the only answer one can give to the question 'How do you know?' is 'Someone told me so'. (Let us throughout this paper use the words telling, saying, and testimony in a sense wide enough to include the use of writing, print, telephone, radio, television, etc. – not just face-to-face conversation.) If we were not entitled thus to rely on testimony, each of us would know very much less than we think we do – only what one has seen for oneself, or what one can inductively support or deductively prove with one’s unaided resources. With some claims one might, if one took enough trouble, check the matter out for oneself, and justify one’s judgement by perception or proof. But in many other cases – such as assertions about the past, about present events too far away to be perceived, or about matters beyond one’s scientific or mathematical competence – verification by the hearer is out of the question.

Our actual dependence on testimony is enormous, then. But when (if ever) is it reasonable to accept something because someone says so? I will concentrate on the first-person form of this question, looking not so much for conditions for the transmission of knowledge from A to B.

One standard view of testimony is that no proposition can be justified merely by the fact that someone has asserted it, i.e., that testimony has no intrinsic or primary evidential force (unlike perception, memory, and induction, according to most theories of knowledge). But this cannot exclude the assembling of evidence that some kinds of testimonies are reliable and hence, justifiably believable on inductive grounds. If one finds that reports on certain kinds of topics or made in certain sorts of circumstances or by certain kinds of people tend to correlate well with the facts of the relevant matters whenever one investigates them for oneself, one might reasonably come to rely on those kinds of testimonies thereafter. This is what has been called the reductionist view of testimony – that it can earn justifying force only by inductive success.

There is an alternative account which we can label criterial, by which belief on the basis of testimony is reasonable, i.e., prima facie justified, by definition. According to an unrestricted version of this, whatever anyone says about anything is, in the absence of contra-indications, worthy of belief. It has been argued that if a speaker knows that P and says that P, then (under certain typical conditions) his hearer comes to know that P too.¹ According to a more restricted version, it is only in certain appropriate circumstances that A’s asserting that P gives a good reason for believing it. For example, if it is known (or, at least, reasonably believed) that someone is or has been in a position to see something, this tends (unless overridden by other factors) to make their testimony about it credible. Eyewitness reports are treated in the courts, in historical enquiry, and in everyday life as having just such epistemic status, defeasibly justifying belief.

In the late medieval and renaissance periods there prevailed an epistemology which strongly emphasized the authority of testimony – at