

# Knowledge and Reality A: Lecture Eight

## 1. What is Testimony?

Any evidence from someone else is taken to be *testimonial* evidence. And this happens *all of the time*. Lots of your beliefs are based upon the testimony of other people.

*Examples of difficult knowledge you take on the back of testimony:* That the world is made up of electrons, protons and neutrons; That your blood carries oxygen; The square root of 1,254,647,241 is 35,421.

*More Routine Examples:* There is a taxi outside; Australia exists; Today's lecture takes place at 10am; It's raining outside.

Testimonial knowledge is commonplace. Indeed, even your own *memory* is a type of testimonial knowledge. When you try and *remember* what things occurred it's like your memory is giving you testimonials. You believe you *used* to be a footballer as a child because your memory 'tells' you this is a fact. So your memory is producing a testimony that you then trust. And of course you *constantly* use your memory, so you're relying on testimonial evidence *all of the time*.

## 2. The Problem With Testimonial Knowledge

Imagine you tell me that I dropped my wallet outside. Presumably, I would then go out and get my wallet back. But what's gone on there? Well, you stated 'You dropped your wallet outside.' I then came to believe that I had dropped my wallet outside (and then acted on it). But how do we get from one to the other?

## 3. Reductionism

The reductionist tactic is one that finds a home with Hume. The Reductionist argues that our justification in testimonial knowledge is grounded in our *non-testimonial* beliefs. It's *reductionist* as we are *reducing down* our justification of beliefs based on testimonial evidence to being justified in beliefs *not* based on testimonial evidence.

Let's have an example of that. 'You dropped your wallet outside' you say. I hear this statement, but I then combine this with other beliefs I have.

- I believe you have a sincere tone in your voice.
- I believe that you are not trying to actively deceive me
- I believe that in the past you have told me true things about what I have dropped

Then, on the back of *those* beliefs, I *infer* that you are telling me something true. I infer that I *have* dropped my wallet outside. So I would come to conclude something based on testimonial evidence (that I dropped my wallet) but do so *on the back of* other (non-testimonial) beliefs.

So that's reductionism – that there are non-testimonial beliefs that I accept which allow me to infer that testimonial evidence is justified. But there are problems with it. Coady's article investigates them more fully, but we'll briefly look at them here.

## 4. Problems With Reductionism

Either the attempt to justify our knowledge will be circular or it will plainly not work in the first place.

Why, in general, should you believe testimonial statements? The reductionist might say it's because this person's other testimonial statements have been true. But how do you know their *other* testimonial statements were true? Whatever you used for *that* can be used *here instead*.

So the worry is that certain beliefs the reductionist will be relying upon are themselves going to require being justified in testimonial knowledge.

*Other examples:*

- You trust your doctor's diagnosis is correct because you trust he is usually correct, but you believe *that* on the back of testimonial evidence (what people

generally say about doctors; that the newspapers don't report gross misconduct on a regular basis etc.)

- You trust the testimony of newspaper reporters for similar reasons (that the *Guardian* generally reports true things etc.)

So that's *one* problem. The other problem is that where it *isn't* circular it *is* useless. That is, where the beliefs you're using to justify testimonial-based reasoning *aren't* themselves testimonial, you *still* have a problem.

For instance, in the doctor scenario you might know that the doctor has successfully treated lots of people; made very similar diagnoses which turned out to be correct etc. Coady argues that if these are testimonial beliefs then they are – as we argued just now – circular. And if they're not it's just *really unlikely that you have those beliefs*. That is, it's *really unlikely* that you have managed to acquire the belief the doctor has successfully treated lots of people *except* via testimonial means. It's *really unlikely* that you know, by non-testimonial means, that the doctor has made lots of similar diagnoses which turned out to be correct. What did you do, sit in the surgery with him?

Try the same for the *Guardian*. How do you know the *Guardian* generally reports true things? One way is that it's been corroborated by other newspapers (but that'd be relying upon testimony again – it'd be circular). Another way would be that you had gone out and checked that the stories turned out to be true (but you didn't. And, practically, never would.)

## 5. Credulism

When it came to testimony, Thomas Reid believed that God had made man with a propensity for telling the truth. So too did he make man with a propensity to accept what he was told. So we are naturally *credulous* when it comes to testimonial evidence. That is, we should accept a testimony unless we have good reason not to. So when it comes to my wallet, I should naturally believe what you say. Unless I have reason not to

- You are stifling a laugh
- You spend lectures spitting spitballs at me and once pinned a note saying 'Kick Me' to my back
- I can feel my wallet in my pocket

When it comes to the doctor, I should believe what he says unless I have a good reason not to.

- I recently slept with his wife, and I think he's looking for payback
- His last patient was told he was fine, but as I passed him on the way out the knife wound was clearly visible

When it comes to the *Guardian* I should believe what it says unless I have good reason not to.

- I'll leave examples here to you – especially as *those* examples might be most telling

So whereas Hume's reductionism says that you need a positive reason in order to believe testimonial evidence, Reid's credulism says that you need a reason *not* to believe testimonial evidence. The order of proof is totally reversed.

So why are you justified in believing testimonial evidence then? Well, given credulism you just are (unless there's a reason not to). It's a bit like perceptual evidence. You have a perceptual experience and then (unless there's a reason not to) you acquire a belief about it.

*Example:* You see a bus coming towards you, and are simply justified in believing that there's a bus coming towards you.

It's a (properly) basic belief. Similarly, this is what the credulist will say about testimony: you encounter testimonial evidence and then, without inferring from other beliefs, come to acquire the (properly) basic belief that these things are the case. There are problems with credulism! But I'll leave you to think about them; read about them; and talk about them yourselves.