

Learning from Others: The Epistemology of Testimony

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Course Topic

The majority of our knowledge depends to some extent on testimony. We know our own names only because somebody told us what we are called. Likewise for our knowledge that Sweden is in Europe, that computers have transistors, and that vegetables are healthy. But what supports our reliance on testimony? It is not as if we can independently verify the majority of the beliefs that we have formed via testimony. So, it is unclear what basis we have for treating testimony as a reliable source. Indeed, when we rely on others' say-so, we rely on their trustworthiness and reliability. Yet we know that people often lie, and often make mistakes. Furthermore, in gaining testimonial knowledge we rely on our ability to reliably understand what others tell us. Yet, we know that linguistic communication is often messy and imprecise, with miscommunication being a common occurrence. This course addresses the epistemological problem of testimony: how do we gain knowledge and justified belief by accepting the testimony of others?

Course Activities

Your task every week will be to read the set readings, watch the weekly lecture, and engage in class discussion utilizing the discussion forums (specific instructions for discussions will be uploaded on Canvas). The lectures are sometimes a little long - in these cases, it is fine (and recommended) to watch them in more than one sitting. Each week there will also be a number of 'suggested readings'. These are readings that will be useful for you to read if you wish to delve deeper into the topic (especially if you choose to write your essay on the topic). There is no expectation that you read the suggested readings.

Assessment

The primary assessment for this course will be an essay. For undergraduates, the word limit will be 3000 words, for graduate students the word limit will be 4000 words. Discussion forum posts will not be formally assessed. However, you will need to complete the discussion forum tasks on at least 5 of the 8 weeks in order to receive a passing grade.¹

¹ Please note that the language for this course is English. The teaching will be conducted in English, and your essays and discussion forum posts should be written in English.

Schedule

Note: This schedule is preliminary and subject to change.

Week 1: The Problem of Testimony & Reductionism (2023-10-31)

(a) Required Reading:

- i. Coady – Testimony, *A Philosophical Study*, Ch 4: ‘Testimony, Observation, and the Reductive Approach’.
- ii. Coady – Testimony, *A Philosophical Study*, Ch 9: ‘Language and Mind’.

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

- i. Fricker – Against Gullibility.
- ii. Lyons – Testimony, Induction, Folk Psychology.
- iii. Shogenji – A Defense of Reductionism about Testimonial Belief.
- iv. Lackey – Testimony and the Infant-Child Objection.
- v. Graham – Formulating Reductionism about Testimonial Warrant . . . etc.
- vi. Goldberg – Testimonial Knowledge in Early Childhood Revisited.
- vii. Sperber et al. – Epistemic Vigilance.

Week 2: Testimonial Anti-Reductionism (2023-11-06)

(a) Required Reading:

- i. Burge – Content Preservation.
- ii. Simion – Testimonial Contractarianism.

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

- i. Graham – Testimonial Entitlement and the Function of Comprehension.
- ii. Lackey - It Takes Two to Tango.

iii. Responses to/defenses of Burge - email me for lots of pdfs.

Week 3: Transmission (2023-11-13)

(a) Required Reading:

- i. Fricker – Second Hand Knowledge.
- ii. Lackey – Learning from Words.

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

- i. Carter & Nickel – Testimony & Transmission.
- ii. Lackey – Testimonial Knowledge Transmission.
- iii. Macfarlane – Knowledge Laundering.
- iv. Barnett – Is Memory Merely Testimony From one’s Former Self?
- v. Wright. . . . Many papers & book on transmission.

Week 4: Assurance Theories (2023-11-20)

(a) Required Reading:

- i. Moran: Getting Told and Being Believed.
- ii. Lackey: Learning from Words (Book) Ch 8. up to sect 8.4

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

- i. Ross: Why do we believe what we’re told?
- ii. Hinchman: Telling as Inviting to Trust.
- iii. Hinchman: Assurance Warrant.
- iv. Leonard: Testimony, Evidence, and Interpersonal Reasons.
- v. Keren – On the Alleged Perversity of the Evidential View of Testimony.
- vi. Owens – Testimony and Assertion.
- vii. Sperber & Wilson – Beyond Speaker Meaning.

Week 5: Testimonial Injustice (2023-11-27)

(a) Required Reading:

- i. Fricker – Epistemic Injustice Ch 1-2.

(b) *Highly* Recommended Reading:

- i. Fricker – Epistemic Injustice Ch 6.

(c) Optional/Suggested Reading:

- i. Fricker – Epistemic Injustice Ch 3, 4, 5, & 7.²

Week 6: Moral Testimony (2023-12-04)

(a) Required Reading:

- i. Hills – Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology.

² There is a large literature responding to or building upon Fricker’s work. There are some great pieces, but also some pretty weak papers. Bear this in mind when you explore this literature.

ii. Sliwa – Changing Minds and Hearts

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

i. Hopkins – What’s Wrong with Moral Testimony.

ii. Sliwa – In Defence of Moral Testimony.

iii. Howell - Google morals, virtue, and the asymmetry of deference.

iv. Morgensen – Moral Testimony Pessimism and the Uncertain Value of Authenticity.

Week 7: Testimonial Pessimism (2023-12-11)

(a) Required Reading:

i. Hazlett – Toward a Social Account of Testimonial Asymmetries.

ii. Pollock – Linguistic Understanding & Testimonial Warrant.

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

i. Drożdżowicz – Making it Precise: Imprecision Underdetermination in Linguistic Communication.

ii. Keren – On Living the Testimonial Skeptic’s Life.

iii. Graham – The Reliability of Testimony.

iv. Peet – Testimony and the Epistemic Uncertainty of Interpretation.

v. Peet – Defective Contexts.

Week 8: Beyond Assertion (2023-12-18)

(a) Required Reading:

i. Fricker – Stating and Insinuating.

ii. Fraser – Narrative Testimony.

(b) Optional/Suggested Reading:

i. Mahon – Novels Never Lie.

ii. Dixon – Novel Assertions – A Response to Mahon.

iii. Dixon – Lies in Art.

iv. Marsili – Fictions that Purport to Tell the Truth.

v. Sperber & Wilson – Beyond Speaker Meaning (if not already read).

vi. Habgood-Coote – Deepfakes the Epistemic Apocalypse.