

Epistemology

Lecture 3: Ways of Knowing – Testimony

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Chapter I: Introduction

The ideal of epistemic autonomy

- Epistemology is replete with norms and ideals.
 - * *nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*
 - * accept beliefs that are true or likely to be true
 - * reject beliefs that are false or likely to be false
- Etymologically speaking, the word 'autonomy' comes from two others: *auto* (self) + *nomos* (law).
- To be autonomous can thus be taken to mean to act freely in accordance with one's own principles.

A rough characterisation

- But what does it mean to exhibit epistemic autonomy?
- Here's one proposal:

An agent is (fully) **epistemically autonomous** just in case they do not rely on anyone else for evidence or reasoning but only on their own cognitive and perceptual abilities.

- Such an agent cannot claim to know a proposition p unless they gathered the evidence for p themselves.

Stepping back in time

- This idea really takes off in the *Meditations On First Philosophy*.
- There Descartes seeks to provide foundations for the whole of knowledge through a **personal** voyage of systematic doubt.

“I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself, sincerely and without holding back, to demolishing my opinions.” (*Meditations I*).

- This first-person perspective is evident also in Locke:

“The floating of other men’s opinions makes us not one jot the more knowing... Such borrowed wealth... though it were gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but leaves and dust when it comes to use” (Essay 1, 3: 24).

Why be autonomous?

- Given that autonomous just means ‘free to govern one’s own affairs’, who *wouldn’t* want to have this freedom?
- Beyond this allusion to freedom, are there are other reasons to opt for epistemic autonomy?
- Perhaps the strongest reason is the following:

Each individual’s access to the world is through *their own* perceptual and cognitive abilities.

- First-hand observations and one’s own reasoning are or at least feel more secure than n^{th} -hand (where $n \geq 2$) ones.



What does it mean to be epistemically autonomous?



Could someone who is truly epistemically autonomous know much about the modern world?

Yes

No

Don't know

Chapter II: Testimony

Testimony and autonomy

- **Testimony:** Roughly, any proposition that an individual asserts (as true) that imparts information to one or more other individuals.
- By convention, we can call the testifier the 'speaker' and the person receiving the testimony the 'hearer'.

NB: That's just for convenience, as everyone accepts that testimony may also be communicated in other ways, e.g. through writing.

- Placing trust in the testimony of others erodes the freedom to govern our epistemic affairs, i.e. our epistemic autonomy.
- Indeed, as we have already seen, in giving up some of this freedom, we also seem to give up some of the security that goes along with it.

Pervasiveness

- Imagine a person who could not rely on testimony. This person's access to information would be severely limited.
- That's because the vast majority of the information we possess is not *acquir-able* via our own direct experience or reasoning.

Examples (information about):

- * bus routes
- * class schedules
- * theatre programmes
- * medical procedures
- * war zones
- * etc.

Testimony's import secured

- The general value of testimony thus seems beyond doubt.
- As Hume, rather succinctly, puts it:

“... there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators” (1977 [1748], p. 74).
- Indeed, *how many things, how fast and how efficiently* we learn is a function of the quantity and quality of testimony.

Rewards yes, but also risks!

- Alas, it's not all good news for those who endorse testimony.
- Speakers can sometimes assert false propositions either unintentionally (e.g. error) or intentionally (e.g. deceit).
- Testimony thus involves risks since there is no guarantee that the information we receive will be correct.
- The question arises: When must a hearer accept testimony from a speaker? Otherwise put, how much risk should the hearer take?

Setting the bar at the right height

- If we set the bar too low, we'll end up with quite a few false beliefs.



- If we set it too high, we'll end up with fewer false beliefs but also with fewer true ones.

The hearer's vulnerability

- As already noted, speakers may deliberately deceive, reveal only part of the truth or even refuse to respond.
- Hearers thus find themselves at a disadvantage. To guard against this, they may impose constraints on testimony:
 - * prior acquaintance with the speaker
 - * continued access to the speaker
 - * the speaker's expertise in the subject
 - * corroboration from independent sources
 - * rich testimony
- Where none of these are satisfied the hearer is particularly vulnerable and may choose to refrain from believing.

Independence: A closer inspection

- Independent sources may consist of further testimony, direct perception, reasoning, etc.
- The case for independence is especially pressing when:
 - * the initial source is known or suspected to be unreliable.
 - * the cost of seeking independent support < than the gain.
- Applications:
 - * law (independent witnesses)
 - * medical diagnosis (getting second, third, etc., opinions)
 - * science (reproducibility of results via varying methods/scientists)

Expertise

- Experts are meant to be individuals we trust as giving reliable testimony vis-à-vis a specific field.
- That is, expert testimony in that field seems to be *ipso facto* trustworthy.
- Two reasons for the existence of experts: (1) natural inclination and (2) efficiency.

Problems:

- * field's knowledge state
- * fallibility of individuals
- * recognising expertise

Imperfect solutions:

- * predictive success
- * second opinions
- * accreditation; coherence

Testimonial contradiction

- In cases of contradictory testimony, it might not always be clear what to do but there are some rules of thumb we can call upon:
 - * Consider the speaker's motives
 - * Trust a friend over a stranger
 - * Prioritise informed testimony
 - * Consult additional opinions
 - * ...
- **Problem:** It is not clear how to weigh (or at least order) these rules.

Testimony in context

- In some cases, little to no evidence and/or argument is *expected* to support a particular assertion to which someone testifies.

Example: Asking for directions.

- Compare this to the cases where testimony appears in (i) commercials and (ii) scientific experiments.
- The justificational requirements we impose on testimony thus seem to vary from context to context.
- **De facto vs. de jure:** This *seems to make good sense* in that the information's criticality differs from case-to-case. But *should* it?

Testimony acceptance rules

- Here's a general rule that attempts to subsume all of the above considerations under the concept 'normal conditions'.

"If the speaker S asserts that p to the hearer H , then, under normal conditions, it is correct for H to accept (believe) S 's assertion, unless H has special reason to object" (Adler 2012).

- Excluding here obvious concerns about how exactly to read 'normal conditions', a lot still hangs on how narrowly or broadly to understand the clause 'special reason to object'.
- If such reasons are not pinned down but also weighted or ordered, the rule risks becoming vacuous.

Testimony acceptance rules (2)

- Fricker (2006) devises a rule that specifies under what conditions we are allowed (and even obliged) to defer to others:

“**TDAP 2**: One properly accepts that P on the basis of trust in another’s testimony that P—her word that P—just if she **speaks sincerely**, and she **is epistemically well enough placed with respect to P** so that were she to have, or make a judgement to form, a conscious belief regarding whether P, her **belief would almost certainly be knowledge**; and she **is better epistemically placed with respect to P than oneself**; and one **recognizes all these things** to be so; and one is **not aware of significant contrary testimony** regarding P” (232).

red: speaker conditions; **green**: hearer conditions



Can you think of other instances where consulting independent sources is encouraged or required?



What other rules-of-thumb can a hearer use to decide between contradictory testimony?

Chapter IV: Knowledge Transmission

Knowledge in transit

- The transferring of knowledge through testimony *seems* to presuppose the following:
 1. The speaker(s) already has/have knowledge in their possession which they then transmit to the hearer(s).
 2. At some point someone in the speaker-hearer chain must have acquired the knowledge through some non-testimonial means.

NB: The second presupposition reflects the idea that testimony is a ‘non-generative’ source of knowledge.

Requiring prior knowledge

- James Ross (1975) suggests the following account of knowledge through testimony:

***S* comes to know that *h* on *W*'s testimony iff *W* knows that *h*, tells *S*, and his telling *S* brings it about that *S* believes that *h* and *h* is evident for *S*.**

- There are those who deny that the transmitter of knowledge needs to know that *h*.
- Dummett (1994) imposes only the constraint that the first transmitter knows that *h*. That is, all others *may not* know it.

Dropping the requirement

- Lackey (1999) goes on to propose a third alternative:

“For every speaker S and hearer H , H comes to know that p via S 's statement that p only if (i) S 's statement that p is appropriately connected with the fact that p ; and (ii) H has no defeaters indicating the contrary” (p. 490).

- Why drop the prior knowledge requirement?
- Because there are some instances where the requirement is not met and yet *intuitively* we want to attribute knowledge.

Example: A creationist teaching evolution to children.

Can there be lucky knowledge?

- Adler (2012: 9) raises a counterexample to Lackey's theory:

“Jones asks a stranger in Manhattan for directions to the Brooklyn Museum, and the stranger answers ‘Take the #2 to Eastern Parkway.’ Jones picks out the stranger by accident from a group of strangers, most of whom are not reliable. Does Jones's luck in picking out a reliable speaker undermine his coming to know based on the stranger's testimony?”
- One intuition: ‘Yes, it is undermined’! Jones was lucky and thus does not really know, i.e. no knowledge is transmitted.
- Another: ‘No, it is not undermined’! The info was truthful and the stranger reliable, i.e. knowledge was transmitted.

Lackey: Among other things, for a hearer to know that P in a chain of testifiers,

- all speakers must know that P. **A**
- some speakers must know that P.. **B**
- speakers need not know that P. **C**
- speakers must not know that P. **D**



Chapter IV (Special Topic): Social Epistemology and Social Choice Theory

Social epistemology

- This is the view that epistemology as a whole or at least in part must take account of, and be understood through, social actors and processes.
- *Inter alia*, this involves testimony and the division of epistemic labour.
- Social epistemology critiques classical epistemological projects like Cartesian rationalism as focusing on the self, thereby ignoring a crucial aspect of human knowledge – that it is shared and communicated.
- Alas, some social epistemology projects take this approach to the extreme, jettisoning robust notions of truth and knowledge in favour of far-fetched analyses of the social powers that mould knowledge.

Example: The strong programme of social constructivism.

Social choice theory

- This is the study of how to aggregate or combine individual opinions, preferences and decisions.
- Actually, it's not one theory but a general theoretical framework within which various theories and/or models are subsumed.

Domains of application: economics and political theory, among others.

- **Relevance:** Multiple testimonies need aggregation.
- Special problems arise in trying to come up with judgment aggregation and social choice theory offers quasi-formal ways to handle these.
- The two most central figures in social choice theory is **Nicolas de Condorcet** (1743-1794) and **Kenneth Arrow** (1921 -).

Condorcet jury theorem



- “... if each member of a jury has an equal and independent chance better than random, but worse than perfect, of making a correct judgment on whether a defendant is guilty (or on some other factual proposition), the majority of jurors is more likely to be correct than each individual juror, and the probability of a correct majority judgment approaches 1 as the jury size increases” (List 2013, p. 2).
- Under these conditions (and some other ones that are not specified here), it seems that majority voting is better at tracking the truth than any *randomly chosen* individual might. But...

Condorcet's paradox

- **Problem:** Even though individual preferences may be rational, aggregating them through the majority rule may yield irrational ones.
- “Suppose, for example, that one third of a group prefers alternative x to y to z , a second third prefers y to z to x , and a final third prefers z to x to y . Then there are majorities (of two thirds) for x against y , for y against z , and for z against x : a ‘cycle’, which violates transitivity” (List 2013, p. 2).
- Transitivity is a property that relations may possess depending on whether or not a given relation satisfies the following rule:

Transitivity rule: For any x , y and z , if Rxy and Ryz then Rxz .

- In the example above, we have Pxy , Pyz and Pzx (instead of Pxz) where ‘P’ stands for ‘prefers over’.

Arrow's impossibility theorem

- **Kenneth Arrow** built on Condorcet's work. He argued that when there is an option of three or more choices then the ranked preferences of two or more individuals cannot be converted into collective preferences via a method that satisfies certain, at first glance, plausible suppositions.



Non-dictatorship: Roughly, this supposition holds that there does not exist a dictator that determines the preferences of the whole group.

- The crucial question for our purposes is whether various methods of aggregating judgment are truth-conducive or warrant preserving.

Example

- “[S]uppose that a three-judge court... must judge the defendant liable if and only if it finds, first, that the defendant’s negligence was causally responsible for the injury... and, second, that the defendant had a duty of care... Suppose that the three judges, A, B, and C, vote as shown below...” (Goldman 2006, p. 13).

	Cause of harm?	Duty of care?	Liable?
A	Yes	No	No
B	No	Yes	No
C	Yes	Yes	Yes
Majority	Yes	Yes	No

- Upshot:** If we go by majority rule then each of the first two columns comes out ‘Yes’ but the third column comes out ‘No’. This contradicts the above rule, namely that two ‘Yesses’ make a ‘Yes’.

The End