

PH458

**Epistemic Autonomy
and Testimony**

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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
- In this lecture we will take a closer look at the ideal of epistemic autonomy.
- Etymologically speaking, the word 'autonomy' comes from two others: *auto* (self) + *nomos* (law).
- To be autonomous thus can be taken to mean *free to act 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.

A step back in time

- The ideal really takes off with Descartes in the *Meditations*.
- There he 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.

Two worlds in collision: Testimony and autonomy

- **Testimony:** Roughly, any proposition that an individual asserts (as true) to impart information to another.
- By convention, we can call the testifier the 'speaker' and the person receiving the testimony the 'hearer'.
- It should be clear that placing trust in the testimony of others erodes this freedom to govern our epistemic affairs.
- Indeed, in giving up some of this freedom, we also seem to give up some of the security that goes along with it.

Specialisation and testimony: The link

- Even so, testimony's affront to epistemic autonomy is not only permitted but encouraged in the modern world.
- You may recall (from the first lecture) that we emphasised the division of labour found in modern science.
- Knowledge and evidence has become highly distributed – testing a hypothesis often depends on multiple testifiers.

Example: The LHC at Cern.



Lecture aim

- The central question we will consider in this lecture is:

How often should we consult, under what circumstances, and how much weight should we attribute to testimony?

- In the context of policy design and implementation, a number of related questions arise:

* Should voters be entirely epistemically autonomous from experts when exercising their right in some referendum?

* Is being a citizen a kind of expertise that must be consulted by policy makers?

Testimony

Pervasiveness

- **Q:** How ubiquitous is the use of testimony?
- **A:** The vast majority of what we claim to know has been generated by other people.

Example: Language

* Evolutionarily: The expressively rich languages we speak have emerged in an organic way over long periods of time.

* Developmentally: A child learns their first language by more or less blindly incorporating the utterances of others.

A life devoid of testimony is a life...

- 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 info we possess is not practically *acquir-able* via direct experience/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 then arises: When must a hearer accept testimony from a speaker?
- Otherwise put, how much risk should the hearer take?

Setting the bar at just 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 far fewer true ones.

Mitigating Risk

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)

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

Solutions:

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

Testimony meets Autonomy

Democracy and autonomy

- Democracy seems to demand autonomous citizens, i.e. those who can make their own decisions.
- In the case of voting, this should be exercised without external coercion.



- Michael Gove (appearing in Sky News):
“People in this country have had enough of experts”
“I’m not asking the public to trust me. I’m asking them to trust themselves”

Conflation of autonomies

- Note that there are two kinds of autonomies being conflated here.
- The ideal of democracy demands that voters are *uncoerced*, not that they are *uninformed*.
- In other words, autonomy in this case means being able to make a final decision without external force or fear thereof.
- Unlike in epistemic autonomy, no demand that a decision is independent of testimony (as Gove seems to suggest).

Fricker's critique of the ideal

- In the article assigned, Fricker argues that humans fall short of the ideal of epistemic autonomy.
- She proceeds to outline under what conditions should we defer to the opinions of others.
- In her own words, the main question of the article is:

“In what way, and to what extent, can one maintain one’s epistemic self-governance despite one’s inevitable reliance on others’ testimony, and the technological fruits of others’ knowledge and expertise, in almost every area of one’s life?” (p. 229).

Normative deference rule

- Fricker 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

Exceptions

- Deference can also be warranted in cases where only some of these conditions are satisfied.

Example: Where the speaker is not an expert with respect to P but still knows more about it than the hearer.

“In these cases it will be epistemically rational for the worse-placed person to defer to the other’s opinion, while falling short of taking her utterance as an expression of knowledge; hence forming only a tentative belief” (232).

- A typical case when such deferral kicks in is when we have a small window of time to make a best-informed judgment.

Weak and strong deferential acceptance

- **Weak deferential acceptance:** Where the hearer has neither a firm belief in p nor are they disposed to form such a belief (when their epistemic resources are kept fixed).

Example: The speaker is a witness to an event that the hearer was not present at.

- **Strong deferential acceptance:** Where the hearer lets the speaker trump their own firm belief in p or disposition to form such a belief.

Example: The speaker is an experienced MD making a diagnosis and the hearer an inexperienced medical student.

Back to expertise

- Fricker uses the concept of 'being well placed' as a (near) synonym for expertise.
- What kinds of conditions allow one to be well-placed?

Accidental:

- * spatio-temporal location

In-built or nurtured:

- * perceptual abilities
- * (other) cognitive abilities
- * knowledge

NB: In some areas, there may be no one better placed.

Unappealing by analogy

- Eradicating testimony from one's life is as utopian as infusing it with all-permeating doubt.

“Giving all that up is no more a serious practical possibility than living out the life of a more thoroughgoing sceptic—one who doubts even the evidence of the senses as indicators of a perceptible external world” (227-8).

- It would mean giving up all semblance of a life.

“the fruits of the sciences including all technology, medicine, dentistry, foreign travel, as well as historical understanding and knowledge... [Such an] individual could not trust an electrician... [a] doctor... her friends” (228). 28

The rational belief argument

- Hardwig (1985) comes up with the following argument against the ideal of epistemic autonomy:
 1. *B* comes to believe *p* through testimony from *A*.
 2. *B* has no evidence that *p*.
 3. *B*'s belief that *p* is rational.
 4. The rationality of *B*'s belief cannot be explained in terms of *B*'s own evidence.
 5. We can only explain its rationality in terms of *A*'s evidence.
 6. Therefore, *B* is epistemically dependent on *A* w.r.t *p*.
 7. Many of our beliefs fit this model.
 8. Therefore, epistemic autonomy is an unrealistic ideal.

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 via 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 , i.e. all others *may not* know it.

Dropping the requirement altogether

- 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, 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.

Reading

- Fricker, E. (2006) 'Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy' in J. Lackey and E. Sosa (eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

The End