

# Responsibility for Testimonial Belief

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## Long Abstract

Much recent work in virtue epistemology has exploited the idea that what distinguishes knowledge from merely accidentally true belief is that knowledge is an achievement of an epistemic agent, something for which an epistemic agent is creditable or responsible. According to so-called “credit views of knowledge”, a subject knows that  $p$  just in case the truth of her belief is an achievement that can be properly ascribed *to her*, an achievement that is the result of the exercise of an intellectual virtue, competence, or ability of the agent (Greco 2003, 2007a, 2009, Sosa 2007, Zagzebski 2001).

One influential criticism of the credit view of knowledge holds that the credit view has difficulty making sense of knowledge acquired from testimony. As Jennifer Lackey (2007, 2009) has argued, in many ordinary cases of the acquisition of testimonial knowledge, if anyone deserves credit for the truth of the audience’s belief it is the testimonial *speaker* rather than the audience, and so it isn’t clear that testimonial knowers are appropriately creditable or responsible for the truth of their beliefs. This isn’t to say that testimonial knowers aren’t *partially responsible* or *partially creditable* for the truth of their beliefs. A testimonial knower must certainly be a responsible recipient of testimony, sensitive to evidence concerning the sincerity and competence of the speaker. However, the abilities that are exercised in being a responsible recipient of testimony are not what most saliently explains *the truth* of the acquired belief. The truth of a testimonial knower’s belief is mostly saliently explained by the exercise of the speaker’s cognitive abilities, Lackey claims, and so it looks like the speaker is ultimately creditable or responsible for the audience’s knowledge.

In this paper I argue that the credit view of knowledge can be saved from Lackey’s objection by focusing on the way in which testimonial knowledge is the result of the exercise of an *essentially social* epistemic competence, a competence that is seated in *a collective* rather than in an individual or even a combination of individuals. Such a view has been provisionally suggested by several adherents of the credit view (for example, Greco 2007b and Sosa 2007), but in this paper I attempt to develop the suggestion in sufficient detail to meet Lackey’s objections.

In particular, I argue that Lackey’s objection draws on a deep and distinctive feature of testimonial belief, namely that a testimonial audience is entitled to *defer epistemic challenges* or *pass the epistemic buck* with respect to her testimonial beliefs (Brandom 1983, 1994, Goldberg

2006, McMyler 2007, forthcoming). On the one hand, this feature of testimonial belief helps us to understand the intuitive force of Lackey's objection. Insofar as a testimonial audience is entitled to pass the epistemic buck, the audience doesn't appear to be solely epistemically responsible for her testimonial belief. The testimonial speaker is partially epistemically responsible for the audience's testimonial belief in the sense that the speaker is responsible for meeting a range of epistemic challenges to the audience's testimonial belief that the audience is entitled to defer back to her. On the other hand, this feature of testimonial belief also helps us to understand the sense in which testimonial knowledge is the result of what Thomas Reid (2002) calls a "social operation of mind", a distinctively social epistemic competence the exercise of which is a cooperative endeavor between speaker and audience.

This then provides the materials for answering Lackey's objection to the credit view. Even though there is indeed a sense in which a testimonial audience is only partially epistemically responsible for her testimonial belief, this is consistent with the truth of her belief being creditable to her in another sense. The truth of her belief is most saliently explained by, and hence is fully creditable to, an essentially social epistemic competence, a competence that is only partially seated in the knowing subject. The truth of her belief thus remains a genuine cognitive achievement. It is an essentially social achievement, something she couldn't have done on her own, but it is nevertheless a genuine cognitive achievement.

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