

Responsibility for Testimonial Belief

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The credit view of knowledge: A subject knows that p just in case the truth of her belief is a cognitive 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.

[W]hen we attribute knowledge to someone we mean to give the person credit for getting things right. Put another way, we imply that the person is responsible for getting things right. The key idea here is not that knowledge requires responsibility *in one's* conduct, although that might also be the case, but that knowledge requires responsibility *for* true belief. Again, to say that someone knows is to say that his believing the truth can be credited to him. It is to say that the person got things right due to his own abilities, efforts and actions, rather than to dumb luck or blind chance or something else. (Greco 2003: 111)

The testimony problem: According to one influential criticism of the credit view, the credit view has difficulty making sense of a broad class of ordinary cases of knowledge, namely knowledge acquired on the basis of testimony.

CHICAGO VISITOR: Having just arrived at the train station in Chicago, Morris wishes to obtain directions to the Sears Tower. He looks around, approaches the first adult passerby that he sees, and asks how to get to his desired destination. The passerby, who happens to be a lifelong resident of Chicago and knows the city extraordinarily well, provides Morris with impeccable directions to the Sears Tower by telling him that it is located two blocks east of the train station. Morris unhesitatingly forms the corresponding true belief. (Lackey 2009: 29).

My solution: I will argue that the credit view of knowledge can be saved from the testimony problem by focusing on the way in which testimonial knowledge is the result of the exercise of an *essentially social* epistemic ability, an ability in virtue of which a testimonial knower is entitled to *defer epistemic challenges* or *pass the epistemic buck*.

To say that the truth of a subject's belief is the result of her reliable cognitive abilities is to say that those abilities are the most salient part of the total set of causal factors that explain why she gets things right. The paradigmatic examples of reliable cognitive abilities capable of most saliently explaining why knowers get things right are abilities like perception, memory, and inference.

When we say that S knows p , we imply that it is not just an accident that S believes the truth with respect to p . On the contrary, we mean to say that S gets things right with respect to p because S has *reasoned in an appropriate way*, or *perceived things accurately*, or *remembered things well*, etc. (Greco 2003: 116, my emphasis).

If testimony cases cause a problem for the credit view, then this must be because, in many ordinary cases of the acquisition of testimonial knowledge, the exercise of the agent's reliable cognitive abilities is not the most salient part of the total set of causal factors that explains why the agent gets things right.

[A]re Morris's reliable cognitive faculties the most salient part of the cause explaining why he truly believes that the Sears Tower is two blocks east? Not at all. Indeed, what explains why Morris got things right has nearly nothing of epistemic interest to do with him, and nearly everything of epistemic interest to do with the passerby. In particular, it is the passerby's experience with and knowledge of the city of Chicago that explains why Morris ended up with a true belief rather than a false belief. Moreover, notice that Morris approached the first adult passerby that he saw, and so even the fact that he received the information from one source rather than another cannot be attributed to Morris. Thus, though it is plausible to say that Morris acquired knowledge from the passerby, there seems to be no substantive sense in which Morris deserves credit for holding the true belief that he does. (Lackey 2007: 352)

Two problems with the way in which Lackey reads CHICAGO VISITOR:

- (1) Lackey claims that what explains why Morris gets things right *has nearly nothing of epistemic interest to do with him*. However, this is straightforwardly inconsistent with many standard conceptions of the epistemology of testimony. For example, it is inconsistent with the idea that testimonial knowledge is a species of knowledge based on ordinary inductive inference.
- (2) Lackey claims that what explains why Morris gets things right *has nearly everything of epistemic interest to do with the passerby*. However, surely the operation of the passerby's own cognitive abilities is unable to make her creditable for the truth of Morris's belief insofar as the exercise of those abilities doesn't so much as explain why Morris ends up with a belief in the first place.

Our question: Is there something that most saliently explains the truth of Morris's belief in a way analogous to that in which reasoning in an appropriate way, perceiving things accurately, or remembering things well can saliently explain the truth of a subject's belief?

It seems to me that there is: What most saliently explains the truth of Morris's belief concerning the whereabouts of the Sears Tower is his *taking it on good authority*.

A distinguishing feature of testimonial belief: Testimonial belief involves an entitlement to *defer epistemic challenges or pass the epistemic buck* back to the speaker from whom the audience acquired her testimonial belief. Epistemic responsibility for testimonial belief is thus shared out interpersonally between speaker and audience.

An ordinary feature of relations of legitimate authority: Authoritative directives provide reasons for belief or action that parcel out responsibility for the belief or action between the authority and the subject of the authority.

If a legitimate practical authority tells a subject to ϕ , and if the subject proceeds to ϕ on this basis, then the authority is partially responsible for the subject's action. If the action is not the thing to do, then the authority deserves (at least partial) blame, and if the action is the thing to do, then the authority deserves (at least partial) credit.

Analogously, if a legitimate theoretical authority tells a subject that p , and if the subject believes that p on this basis, then the authority is partially responsible for the subject's belief. If the belief is false, then the authority deserves (at least partial) epistemic blame, and if the belief is true, then the authority deserves (at least partial) epistemic credit.

This serves to vindicate the spirit of the credit view of knowledge: *Pace* Lackey, there is indeed a specific testimonial faculty that can shoulder the burden of most saliently explaining the truth of a testimonial knower's belief. What most saliently explains the truth of Morris's testimonial belief is his taking it on good authority. In this sense, the truth of Morris's belief is a genuine cognitive achievement, a genuine success through ability. However, this achievement is not something he could have done on his own. It is not an achievement through his own, individually possessed cognitive abilities, but neither is it an achievement through the speaker's own, individually possessed cognitive abilities. Rather, this achievement requires the cooperative activity of both testimonial speaker and audience—a speaker who, in testifying, assumes the responsibility to meet certain challenges that may then be deferred back to her and an audience who, in accepting the speaker's testimony as an authoritative directive, accepts the speaker's assumption of epistemic responsibility. This helps to explain what is intuitive about the testimony problem, but it is nevertheless consistent with seeing the truth of a testimonial knower's belief as a genuine cognitive achievement. It is an achievement in cooperation with others, something one cannot do on one's own, but this doesn't make it any less of an achievement.

References

- Greco J. (2003), "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief" in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, eds. DePaul and Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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