

The Epistemic Role of Testimony: Internalist and Externalist Perspectives

Setting aside radical skeptical concerns, it seems almost a truism that much of what we believe is based on the testimony of others. Beliefs about the distant past are based on the writings of historians. Beliefs about the microworld are based on the word of physicists. Beliefs about the names, ages, histories, habits, likes and dislikes of friends are largely based on information those friends provide. There are important distinctions one can make between kinds of testimony.¹ Throughout this paper, however, I will be relying on a very broad understanding of the term. Any genuine assertion one person makes for the consumption of another will count, for these purposes, as that person's testifying to some putative fact. The assertion can be oral or written, formal and under oath, or casual in some familiar context of conversation. Again, understood this way, the road to much of what we believe travels through the testimony of other people.

Any plausible epistemology must distinguish questions about the genesis of belief from its epistemic justification.² If it is relatively uncontroversial from the perspective of commonsense that we very often rely on information provided by other people, it is far less clear how to construe the nature of the *evidential* path we need to travel in getting *justified* belief through reliance on testimony. The traditional view of testimony and the way in which it contributes to justified belief makes the epistemic road long and winding. We hear sounds or see marks. We then must reasonably interpret those sounds and marks as meaningful assertions. Critically, we must have some reason to believe that the assertions in question are likely to be true. Only then are we in a position to reach a rational conclusion that takes into account what other people say. More recently, however, philosophers have begun to challenge the idea that the epistemic contributions

of testimony are so complex. Some have even seemed to suggest that reliance on testimony should be viewed as just as fundamental as reliance on inductive reasoning, memory, or perception.³

The attempt to determine how, if at all, testimony contributes to knowledge is made more difficult these days as the debate takes place in the shadow of the internalism/externalism controversy that dominates contemporary epistemology. In this paper I want to contrast the way in which classical internalists and paradigm externalists might approach the question of how to construe the justification (if any) provided by testimony. In particular, I am interested in the question of whether testimonial inference has a fundamental or a derivative place in our reasoning. In the course of answering this question we will have occasion to examine more closely this alleged distinction between fundamental and derivative principles of reasoning.

A Classical Internalist Foundationalism and a Traditional Approach to Testimony:

On classical internalist foundationalist models of justification, the epistemic tasks one must complete in order to justify belief based on testimony are intimidating to say the least. There are, of course, radically different versions of internalism. I have argued elsewhere (Fumerton, 1985 and 1996) that one of the most demanding, but also one of the most plausible, takes S's foundationally justified beliefs to be those justified by S's direct acquaintance with a correspondence between a belief/thought and the fact that makes it true. That version of foundationalism *need* not be a version of internal state internalism, at least if the *internal* states of a subject are defined as those states that

include as constituents only the self, its non-relational properties and those relations it bears to itself and its nonrelational properties. According to Russell (1959), for example, we can be directly acquainted with universals and relations that hold between them. Universals are hardly mind-dependent entities. Also, direct realism as a theory of perception is making a bit of a comeback. At least some philosophers hold that in veridical perception we are directly acquainted with mind-independent constituents of physical objects.⁴

On a direct acquaintance theory, one's stock of foundationally justified beliefs is a function of the class of facts with which one can be directly acquainted. The radical empiricists, of course, were convinced that the only contingent truths one knows noninferentially are descriptions of the current contents of one's mind. They were convinced that one is directly acquainted only with one's own subjective states and the truth makers for necessary truths. *That* version of the acquaintance theory would take one's justification for believing contingent truths to be constituted by one's internal states.

However, the classical foundationalist construes foundational knowledge, that foundationalist will also need an account of how one moves from foundational knowledge to the rest of what one justifiably believes. This is another issue which separates paradigm internalists and externalists. On the view that I call *inferential internalism*, in order for S to be justified in believing P on the basis of some other proposition justifiably believed E, S must be justified in believing that there is a probabilistic connection between E and P (where entailment can be viewed as the upper limit of making probable).⁵

Inferential internalism can be made at least initially attractive if we think about some commonplace epistemic criticisms of inferentially formed beliefs. The astrologer who forms beliefs about the future of human beings based on information he possesses concerning the positions of planets and stars has unjustified beliefs if he lacks reason to believe that there is some sort of probabilistic connection between the position of celestial bodies and the affairs of human beings. One who infers that a person will have a long life from the observation that the person has a long 'life line' on the palm of her hand, forms an irrational belief in the absence of possessing good reason to think that a line on one's palm has some connection to the length of one's life.

One must be cautious, however, before one relies too heavily on the above intuitions to defend inferential internalism.⁶ The problem is that we are prosmicuous in our characterization of *the* evidence from which we infer conclusions. In casual conversation we often identify as our evidence for believing some proposition only a particularly interesting *part* of the entire body of knowledge upon which we rely in reaching our conclusion. I call the police and report that I have been robbed. If asked why I think that is so, I might cite as my evidence that my window has been broken and my valuables are missing. But it seems fairly clear on reflection that there is a vast array of unstated background information upon which I rely in reaching my conclusion. I know that I live in a culture in which it is not acceptable for friends and relatives to borrow my belongings with or without my permission and to use force if necessary to enter my home in order to achieve that end. I also know that glass does not typically break spontaneously causing valuables to disappear in nihilo. I also know (or at least think that I know) that I am not a psychotic prone to staging robberies which I

subsequently can't remember having staged. To be sure, I probably don't consciously bring all these beliefs to mind in reaching the conclusion that I've been robbed, but it is perfectly plausible to suppose that their presence as dispositional beliefs plays a crucial role in my willingness to reach the conclusion that I've been robbed.

Once we realize that many, if not most, accounts of our reasoning are enthymematic, it is far less obvious what lesson we should learn from the fact that we reject astrological 'reasoning' as illegitimate in the absence of justified belief concerning connections between celestial events and human affairs. It is more than likely that we, and for that matter the astrologers, view their reasoning as enthymematic. No-one, not even an astrologer, is crazy enough to suppose that one can somehow legitimately infer that Susan is going to meet the love of her life from the fact that she was born in December and Jupiter is aligned with Mars. Everyone simply assumes that the information concerning birthdates and planets is only a *part* of a more complex array of premises which constitute the complete story of the alleged evidence justifying the astrological prediction. Furthermore, it is natural to assume that the unstated premises make assertions about correlations between celestial facts and human affairs. We reject the astrologer's conclusions as unjustified not because the astrologer lacks justification for believing that the premises of his argument make probable the conclusion, but because we are convinced that the astrologer lacks justification for believing a critical but unstated *premise* upon which he was relying.

Having said all this, I still think that inferential internalism is a plausible view. Deductively valid arguments are surely the paradigm of arguments whose premises bear an appropriate relation to their conclusion. And it still seems obvious to me that if

someone infers a conclusion C from some known premise E when E entails C, it doesn't follow that the person has a justified belief in C based on E. If the person in question fails to 'see' the connection—doesn't realize that the entailment holds--then the person lacks inferential knowledge.

The Status of Testimonial 'Inference' on the 'Traditional' view:

My main concern here is not with the plausibility of inferential internalism. Rather, I want to see what lessons we can learn from the above discussion concerning the character of inferences that rely on testimony. And the first conclusion we *might* reach is that the whole idea of relying on testimony as a *kind of inference* is potentially misleading. Inferences from testimony might be like astrological 'inferences.' We do not, in fact, *ever* infer that P from the fact that some person tells us that P. To be sure we *talk* that way. We'll identify as our evidence for believing some proposition the testimony of another person. But a full and perspicuous representation of the reasoning will make explicit unstated premises upon which we critically rely in reaching our conclusion that P. The perspicuous representation of the argument we accept might be something like the following:

- 1) Jones said that P in conditions C (where C includes a description of Jones, his qualifications as an authority and the circumstances under which he made the assertion).

- 2) People who make assertions like P in conditions C are usually saying something true.

Therefore,

- 3) P

That something like the above is the more perspicuous representation of the reasoning involved in reliance on testimony is also suggested by careful characterizations of the supposed fallacy of appealing to authority. I began this paper by observing that we rely on authority for much of what we believe. It would indeed be a bit unfortunate if this reliance involved some sort of fallacy. The writers of texts on informal fallacies understand clearly that they had better be careful in characterizing the fallacy in question. As a result, they typically describe it as the fallacy (better, mistake) of relying on the testimony of someone who is not in fact a reliable authority concerning the subject of his testimony. An *epistemically* more sensitive characterization of the mistake would presumably make reference instead to the epistemic position of the person relying on the testimony. An *epistemic* mistake is committed only if one relies on an authority when one has no reason to believe that the person in question is reliable. But if that's the mistake that constitutes the fallacy of appeal to authority, the clear implication is that when one is *not* making the mistake one *does* have some good reason to believe that the person is reliably testifying—that is, one has some good reason to believe our premises 1) and 2) above.

Earlier, I suggested that some recent work on testimony appears to focus on whether testimonial inference is fundamental or derivative. I'm now suggesting that this

way of putting the controversy is needlessly confusing. *In general*, there may be no useful distinction between fundamental and derivative principles of reasoning. It's harmless enough to suggest that there is an epistemic rule permitting an inference from the litmus paper turning red in the solution to the conclusion that the solution is acidic, a rule which had to be learned from experience, and is that sense derivative. But it is surely more perspicuous to suggest that there is no rule of inference *at all* sanctioning an inference from the proposition that the paper is red to the conclusion that the solution is acidic. Rather, the representation of the reasoning in question is enthymematic. It is only in conjunction with certain background information that the premise describing the litmus paper allows us to draw the conclusion. The most obvious unstated premise is one that describes a correlation between the change in the litmus paper and the character of the solution. The reasoning, when described fully, is either deductively valid (if the premise takes the form of a universal proposition describing the correlation) or inductive (if the premise describes merely observed or statistical correlations). Either way there is no need to recognize 'secondary' epistemic principles sanctioning 'litmus reasoning.' We need only keep in mind that our descriptions of our reasoning are often (indeed, in ordinary discourse, almost always) enthymematic.

So the most perspicuous characterization of the *traditional* internalist's approach to understanding the role of testimony in acquiring justified belief is probably that strictly speaking there is no testimonial inference at all. When we make explicit critical unstated premises, we find that the *reasoning* that takes account of testimony is just some other familiar sort of deductive or nondeductive reasoning that employs at least one premise describing what other people say.

As we noted earlier, on the classical internalist/foundationalist model, the way in which information about what others say can legitimately be taken into account in reaching conclusions is complicated indeed. On a radical empiricism we first need to reach a justified belief that there are real mind-independent sounds and marks (based on what we seem to hear and see). I am not about to discuss the problem of perception here, so we'll just suppose for the sake of argument that we don't have any difficulty getting to knowledge of an external, mind-independent reality. But our work has just begun. We need some reason to believe that those sounds and marks are meaningful symbols.

What is involved in rationally believing that sounds or marks are representations of reality? That also is a question that would take us far afield. To answer it we'd need a general account of representation and intentionality. On classical views (which I think are almost obviously correct), we need to draw a distinction between signs that represent only by convention and signs that are in some sense 'natural.'⁷ 'Cat' represents a certain kind of animal but only because human beings *assigned* the mark or sound a certain task. If we collectively decided that we wanted that symbol to represent something else, we would need only to reach an alternative agreement. It used to seem obvious to almost all philosophers that not all symbols could represent by convention. Indeed, it seems plausible to suppose that unless we could independently think of both the symbol and what we use it to stand for, conventional representation would be impossible. But if that's right and thought itself represents only conventionally, we face a vicious regress. To assign thought its representational role we'd have to think of the thought and that for which it stands. To end the regress we need to recognize that there is a way of

representing the world that does not rely on convention. On the traditional view, conventional representation presupposes a ‘language’ of thought that represents naturally.

If the above is right, we now need an analysis of ‘natural’ representation. In virtue of what does something X represent naturally something else Y? The internalism/externalism debate in epistemology is paralleled by a similar debate in philosophy of mind. Painting with a very broad stroke, most externalists are naturalists who attempt to understand representation employing causal analyses. X represents Y in virtue of the fact that X is nomologically tied to Y in certain ways. The devil is, of course, in the details. Information theoretic accounts have labored long and hard to tell us how we single out from among the vastly complex chain of causes and effects that produce some brain state the one that is represented by the brain state. Depending on just how the account goes, it *may* be possible to get *language* back on the side of natural representation. The import of much of Putnam’s work (1975, 1978, 1988) (and before him Sellars (1957)) is to deny that one needs a radically different account of how thought represents from the account one gives of how language represents. The use of word tokens can stand at the end of causal chains just as surely as can images in the mind, or neurons firing in the brain, and if they occupy the right place in the right causal chains they can represent in precisely the same way that images or brain states can represent.

Waiting in the wings for the collapse of naturalistic accounts are ‘magical’ theories—theories that maintain that certain states of mind (and *only* states of mind) have intrinsic and sui generis *content*.⁸ Intentional states are unlike anything else simply in virtue of having the capacity to correspond to reality. That capacity to correspond defies any sort of reductive analysis. The view is derided as ‘magical’ just because the critic is

convinced that these peculiar states are dragged into the picture as a kind of *deus ex machina* to solve fundamental problems concerning intentionality. Of course, most every philosopher who engages in analysis will admit that analysis must begin *somewhere*. There must be conceptual building blocks if we are to understand anything, and proponents of the magical theory should not apologize for the fact that something as mysterious as thought cannot be assimilated to any other natural phenomenon.

Again, we cannot expect to resolve the most fundamental questions concerning intentionality here. Our only concern is to point out that the nature of the epistemic task we need to complete in construing sounds or marks as testimony seems to depend directly on the account of intentionality one puts forth. The naturalists will suppose that the task of discovering that certain sounds or marks have the content they do is the task of discovering complex facts about their causal origin. The proponent of the magical theory who thinks that only thought represents naturally will be convinced that the key to correctly interpreting apparent language is to come up with the right hypothesis about what states of mind occur in the person (or people) who produce the relevant sounds or marks.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the internalist is right. The meanings of sounds or marks are to be found in the head, or better in the minds, of those who produce those sounds and marks. To interpret reasonably those sounds or marks we now need to solve the problem of other minds. We need to find some reason to suppose that those marks have the meaning we take them to have. That will minimally involve figuring out what conscious states were involved in their production. When the language we are interpreting is our own—without begging the question, when the sounds or marks appear

to be of the same type as those we ourselves use to express thoughts--one might suppose that our best hope is to rely on some version of an argument from analogy or an argument to the best explanation. And indeed, I think that's probably right. The symbols 'There's a mountain nearby' as used by me express a thought with which I am introspectively acquainted. Suppose I'm on the first expeditionary trip to Mars and upon setting foot on the planet immediately notice clearly etched on a rock face the symbols 'There is a mountain nearby.' While amazed and bewildered, I have no doubt that I would be irresistably inclined to think that this was indeed a message, and that the message had the same content as the message in my language. I'd probably also think that there was a decent chance that the mountain was nearby. And notice that I'd probably think all this even if I had absolutely *no* further explanation of how the marks appeared. My thought would probably be that it would be such a bizarre coincidence that marks with that form and syntax appeared without having *some* connection to my own symbols with the meanings they have, that any other hypothesis is simply unbelievable. Note well that I don't have to be very clear at all about the connection in question. It could be that what I take to be our respective symbols acquired the meanings they have due to some unknown common cause. It could be that one of us somehow caused the other to adopt the relevant conventions. But the existence of some connection or other just seems more plausible than the detailed convergence of form and syntax that would otherwise be mysterious.

The above is not intended to be a very convincing argument. At the risk of setting aside all of the really difficult epistemological problems, I'll again simply beg off solving the difficult questions concerning arguments by analogy and arguments to the best explanation that would need to be explored in depth as part of any serious attempt to

uncover the epistemic justification we possess for interpreting the familiar symbols we encounter. I will note in passing that the approach sketched above is committed to rejecting Davidsonian (1984) arguments (also embraced by Coady) for the idea that we must inevitably presuppose the *truth* of what people say (and also that what they say has a certain content) if we are to arrive at translations. If what is said above is correct, there may be a much cruder way of arriving at conclusions about meaning that are at least *prima facie* plausible.

On the traditional approach, reaching a rational conclusion about what symbols mean and that they are used as *assertions* is, of course, not the last step in the implicit reasoning involved in reliance on testimony. We need some reason to believe that the assertions are likely to be true. Given a radical empiricism, that reason will need to be traced again back to what we know about ourselves. Setting aside again some more extreme skeptical concerns,⁹ we find ourselves in epistemic situations in which there are certain truths that it is pretty easy for us to come to know. When we have reason to believe that there is another person in a similar epistemic situation, we have reason to believe that that person would have similar access to those kinds of truths. For example, when conscious I know when I have a headache and when I don't. I expect that if you are remotely like me you are similarly positioned to know whether or not you have a headache. I also know of myself that I don't usually lie about such matters, and in the absence of any other information, therefore, I will, based on analogy, take what you say about your headache as a pretty good indicator of truth.

I deliberately started with testimony about the simplest of truths. Things get more complicated the more controversial the background assumptions about epistemic position

get, and the more controversial background assumptions about motives to mislead are. All this mirrors precisely the controversies we encounter concerning whether or not to rely on testimony. Hume was quite right in suggesting that there are all kinds of live hypotheses as to why people might testify falsely concerning the occurrence of miracles. Alibis provided by mothers and lovers of the accused don't carry nearly as much weight as alibis provided by people the accused doesn't even know. The testimony of other philosophers concerning the truth of their philosophical views carries almost no epistemic weight at all for philosophers when it comes to evaluating those views.

None of this is very original. While I do think that the traditional approach to understanding the evidential role of testimony is quite right—indeed almost obviously right—my primary concern in this paper is to see what *alternatives* are available to both internalist and externalists. More specifically how might one try to find room within one's epistemology for genuine *fundamental* testimonial inference? The search for sui generis fundamental epistemic principles that sanction moves from hearing testimony to forming beliefs might be motivated partly by phenomenology. Classical foundationalists have often been accused of radically over-intellectualizing the processes by which we form beliefs. The view that we reach conclusions about the objective external world based on truths we discover about subjective and fleeting experience has often been criticized on the grounds that we rarely even pay attention to subjective appearance. There may be an appearance/reality distinction, but it takes a certain skill—the kind of skill acquired by painters, for example—to even notice the many and subtle ways in which appearance is constantly shifting. The person who actually wanders around *consciously* inferring truths about his physical environment from truths about appearance

is probably not destined to stay that long in this world. If you can't react instinctively to sensory stimulation with the quick realization that the bus is bearing down on you, you've had it.

Just as it seems implausible to suppose that our beliefs about objects directly in front of us are produced through inference from truths we notice about appearance, so also it might seem implausible to suppose that in relying on testimony we travel anything like the long and winding road postulated by the radical empiricist. When I'm on the golf course and hear someone yell 'Fore,' I'd better duck. If I stand there trying to complete the steps of a rational reconstruction of my ultimate reliance on the 'testimony' provided by that golfer's warning, I'm in serious danger.

It's not clear that the traditional approach need worry much about this alleged phenomenological data. Earlier, I suggested that there is no difficulty in supposing that dispositional beliefs can play a critical causal role in both producing and sustaining belief. I need not consciously rely on background information in forming some conclusion for my background beliefs to be playing the critical causal role. Just as I have background beliefs about truths that can serve as implicit premises, so also I may have background beliefs about inferential connections. Furthermore, those dispositional beliefs may concern particular inferences rather than general epistemic rules. If anything is obvious, it is that the mind is extraordinarily complex and it would surely not be surprising if much of the inference that takes place does not take place at the conscious level.

Still, one might worry about the fact that the traditional foundationalist's reconstruction of reliance on testimony requires so many problematic steps. Traditional

foundationalism generally is fertile ground for skepticism. It might be a relief if we could understand the way in which testimony contributes to rational belief in a more straightforward way. But the world doesn't always cooperate to make life easy, and we need to figure out whether it is at all plausible to suppose that there is a more straightforward epistemic route from hearing testimony to forming rational beliefs. In what follows, I want to emphasize that the prospects for finding that more straightforward route are directly related to one's position on the internalism/externalism debate and one's corresponding position on the content and modal status of epistemic principles.

The Modal Status of Epistemic Principles and Internalist and Externalist Prospects for Recognizing Independent Testimonial Reasoning:

We haven't said much about epistemic principles. I've hinted already that the distinction between fundamental and derivative epistemic principles might itself be spurious. Arguments that employ so-called derivative epistemic principles are probably better thought of as enthymematic arguments governed by legitimate epistemic principles that license the inference from premises to conclusion. Strictly speaking derivative epistemic 'principles' aren't epistemic principles at all.

Epistemic principles can be thought of and described in a number of different ways. Consider the following:

- 1) If S has property X then S is justified in believing P.
- 2) S's having property X makes prima facie probable P for S.

Property X can be understood as broadly as you like. I don't want to prejudice any questions concerning what can justify a belief. So property X can be the property of having other beliefs, having other justified beliefs, being in a certain conscious state, having a brain state with a certain causal origin, or what have you. Principles governing inferential justification presumably license inference from believing one proposition justifiably to believing another. Principles governing noninferential justification license belief when one is in certain non-doxastic states. 1) and 2) might be just alternative ways of saying the same thing, but it is nevertheless important to be clear about which epistemic concept one takes to be conceptually fundamental. Chisholm and his followers, for example, clearly take as primitive certain epistemic properties of belief—specifically the comparative property of *being more reasonable to believe than*. Keynes (1921) and his followers took the most fundamental concept in epistemology to be the logical concept of probability. On Keynes's view there are relations of making probable holding between propositions that are directly analagous to relations of entailment holding between propositions.¹⁰ When we make a reasonable inference, the rationality of belief in our conclusion is in part a function of our ability to 'see' the relation of making probable holding between our premises and our conclusion. On Keynes view, propositions asserting probability relations are *necessary* truths knowable *a priori*. Such a view would be a Godsend to inferential internalists who are convinced that inferential justification requires awareness of probabilistic connections between premises and conclusions. The inferential internalists must obviously terminate a potential regress when it comes to getting justification for believing that the relevant inferential

connections obtain. If propositions asserting those connections are necessary truths knowable a priori, it is plausible to suppose that knowledge of such connections can be foundational.

There are, of course, alternatives to construing the probability appealed to in 2) as Keynesian logical probability. One could hold that the relevant probability has something to do with frequency. Roughly, the idea is that we'd have to assign exemplifying the pair of properties, being X and believing P to a pair *kind*. We could then understand the probability claim as asserting that usually when the first member of the pair kind is instantiated by a subject, the second member (the belief) is true. The attempt to construe the probability appealed to in 2) in terms of frequency (or propensity) in effect makes 2) as a statement of an epistemic principle a version of reliabilism.¹¹ Any view that takes epistemic principles to be assertions of probability and then understands the relevant probability in terms of frequency will inevitably render epistemic principles *contingent* truths knowable only *a posteriori*. With such a view one would do well to eschew inferential internalism for there will be no plausible way to terminate a regress of justification that arises in connection with the possibility of justifying belief in inferential connections.

With the above as background, let us return to testimony. As we saw, on one rather natural understanding of the role of testimony in justifying belief there is no need to recognize epistemic principles taking the form of 1) or 2) that govern specifically testimony. Reasoning from testimony can easily be construed as a species of some other familiar sort of reasoning (inductive reasoning or reasoning to the best explanation), a form of reasoning which includes among its *premises* information about what other

people assert. Is there an alternative to that view? The answer, of course, will depend in part on what one takes an epistemic principle to assert and on what one takes its modal status to be. Let's consider some candidates for an epistemic principle governing testimony.

T) When R hears a sentence 'S' (e.g. the words 'There is a dog outside') in the sort of conditions that characterize a context of genuine assertion, that makes probable for R that S (e.g. that there is a dog outside.)

T) certainly seems an unlikely candidate for the kind of synthetic necessary truth that a Keynesian would take a genuine epistemic principle to assert. Clearly there are all sorts of *possible* situations in which hearing those words would not make even *prima facie* probable (in any sense relevant to epistemology) the truth of the proposition that there is a dog outside. For one thing, there are all sorts of situations in which those words have an entirely different meaning.

Don't confuse the above with a quite different and clearly bad argument. One might suppose that *no* epistemic principle asserting a *probability* connection could be a necessary truth. After all, the fact that E only makes probable P suggests that E *can* be true while P is false. But if that is so then it can hardly be a necessary truth that E makes probable P. But that is to confuse the modal status of the conditional (If P then Q) with the modal status of the claim that P makes (prima facie) probable Q. The fact that I vividly seem to remember having a headache earlier might make probable that I did have the headache. Can we imagine a world in which my seeming to remember that

experience doesn't make prima facie likely that I had the experience? Well, I can certainly imagine a world in which I seemed to remember having the experience when I didn't have it. I can probably even imagine a world in which the *conjunction* of my seeming to remember having the headache together with some other proposition (e.g. that my memory is hopelessly bad and I'm prone to 'hallucinatory' memory states) doesn't make probable that I had the headache. But all that is perfectly consistent with its being true—indeed, *necessarily* true—that my seeming to remember having the headache makes prima facie likely that I had the headache. Again, it is not the least bit plausible to suppose it is a necessary truth that my hearing the sounds 'there is a dog outside' makes likely for me that there is a dog outside and if genuine epistemic principles are necessary truths, T) isn't a genuine epistemic principle.

The situation is much more complicated if we adopt the position that the relevant epistemic principle simply asserts a statistical correlation of some sort between the processing of certain kinds of input and the truth of output beliefs. On most versions of reliabilism there is *no* a priori restriction on what can count as an unconditionally or a conditionally reliable belief-forming process. Plantinga (2000) points out, quite correctly, that there *might* be a Holy Spirit who is causally responsible for one's acquiring true belief in the existence of God. Should such a being exist and be causally active in producing true beliefs about God's existence, the resulting belief would be a prime candidate for a noninferentially justified belief (noninferentially, because the input, by hypothesis, involves no justified beliefs).

Have speakers evolved in such a way that when they take as input auditory experiences of certain symbols they immediately and unreflectively believe what they

take the symbols to assert? And critically, does this process typically result in true beliefs? It is not perhaps wildly implausible to suppose that there may be such ways of forming beliefs that *are* generally reliable. A great deal (as always) depends on how the frequentist/reliabilist addresses the generality problem—how they specify in detail the relevant input-output mechanism. But if one includes enough mundane situations—situations in which people give you relatively unproblematic information about the time of day, the weather, their names, their ages, and the like—it may be plausible to suppose that something like T) is true when the probability is understood in terms of frequency. It is, of course, an empirical question. In fact, as I suggested earlier, I suspect that there are all sorts of background beliefs playing a critical causal role in the resulting ‘output’ beliefs. I doubt therefore that T) accurately describes an actual process of forming beliefs that we employ. Even if T) were true, if we are never actually induced to believe a proposition based on the satisfaction of the conditions described in T)’s antecedent, we are not getting justified beliefs by implicitly ‘following’ T).¹² But I’m a philosopher not a psychologist/sociologist/cognitive scientist. One can at least imagine our evolving in such a way that we are now so constituted that we skip whatever intermediate premises upon which the traditional foundationalist thought we needed to rely.

From the perspective of one who takes epistemic principles to state necessary truths, I said that T) above is a rather pathetic candidate for an epistemic principle concerning testimony. But there are, of course, others. One could, for example, modify T) as follows:

T*) When S hears someone say ‘There is a dog outside’ *and* rationally takes that sentence to be a sincere assertion that there is a dog outside, then it is prima facie reasonable for S to believe that there is a dog outside.

On one way of thinking about it, T*) isn’t much more implausible than doxastic conservatism—the view that a proposition acquires a certain prima facie probability for S from the mere fact that S believes it. On T* one takes the fact that someone believes P to make prima facie probable that P is true. One must emphasize again that the proposition that someone’s sincerely assenting to P makes probable P does not imply that P is probable relative to *everything* we know. As we saw earlier, one must take account of all sorts of other relevant truths in calculating the probability of P relative to one’s *total* body of evidence. *Controversial* assertions automatically lose whatever probability is conferred on them from the fact that some person sincerely assents to the proposition asserted. What makes an assertion controversial, trivially, is that there isn’t much agreement on its truth—some people assert the proposition while others assert its negation. So P might be made probable by the fact that S sincerely asserts it while not-P is made probable by the fact R asserts it. Relative to the fact that roughly equal numbers of people assent as dissent from P, and those facts alone, P is presumably no more likely than not-P. Relative to important information I might possess, P’s probability might be 1 regardless of how many people believe not-P (if for example P is a proposition describing some obvious fact about my current conscious states).

Is T*) a candidate for the sort of fundamental epistemic principle to which a Keynesian would be committed? Well I suggested that it is not much more implausible

than principles of epistemic conservatism. But then I've never found principles of epistemic conservatism very plausible. It has never seemed to be very plausible to suppose that the mere fact that someone believes a proposition (even if I am that person) confers the least likelihood on the proposition's being true (leaving aside those trivial cases in which the having of the belief entails its truth—e.g. the belief that there are beliefs). So I'm not inclined to think that the Keynesian inferential internalists should recognize T*) as a true epistemic probability principle having as much credibility as a principle of induction or a principle of memory. But the issue really now hinges on deep and difficult methodological issues in epistemology. In his famous discussion of the problem of the criterion Chisholm (1966) suggests that we simply have to decide whether or not we are going to take skepticism seriously. If we do not—if we take the fact that a philosophical view leads to skepticism as a *reductio* of that view—then we should adjust our epistemic principles until they allow us to achieve our non-skeptical conclusions. If one thinks that the traditional story of how to trust the testimony of others is fatally compromised by the need to rely on inductive arguments that proceed from the limited sample of one's own case, then one may simply need to supplement the epistemic principles that entitle us to form beliefs by adding to them a principle like T*). But we can't be Keynesians (or Chisholmian's, for that matter) and ignore the supposed modal status of the principles we add to our stock of epistemic principles in order to achieve desired epistemic ends. Though Chisholm is more coy than is Keynes, both will in the final analysis insist that epistemic principles state necessary truths knowable a priori. And it is an odd justification of commitment to a necessary truth that we 'need' it to get where we want to go. The principle really should strike you as being necessary in

precisely the same way that other synthetic necessary truths (What is red all over is not blue all over) strike you as necessary.

Once again T*) is a perfectly plausible candidate for a fundamental epistemic principle on an externalist/frequency understanding of the reference to probability. I'm not really interested in acquiring the empirical evidence that would be required in order to discover that people actually do process data to form beliefs where the processing would accord with such a principle. That's a task better left to cognitive scientists, psychologists, or perhaps evolutionary theorists.

Conclusion:

The plausibility of recognizing a general and sui generis epistemic principle sanctioning testimonial inference is directly proportional to the plausibility of an externalist understanding of probability claims. Let reliabilism be a paradigm of externalism. Just as reliabilism places no a priori restrictions on what kinds of beliefs might be *noninferentially* justified (because there is no end of *possible* belief-independent unconditionally reliable belief-forming processes), so also reliabilism also places no a priori restrictions on what interestingly different kinds of *inferentially* justified beliefs there are (because there is no end of possible belief-dependent reliable belief-producing processes). I have argued elsewhere (1995) that the very ease with which noninferential and inferential justification proliferates on most externalist views might give one pause. If one insists that inferential justification requires awareness of inferential connections,

then the prospects for finding epistemic principles sanctioning sui generis testimony inferences are slim.

NOTES

¹ See Coady (1992) for an extended discussion of different sorts of testimony and a definition (32, 42) of what testimony involves. Coady's definition is problematic in that he seems to argue that S's statement constitutes testimony only when that S has the competence, authority, or credentials to state truly that P. In order to evaluate the epistemic worth of testimony we surely need a way of characterizing it that leaves open the competency of the person who puts forth the testimony.

² That the two are distinct doesn't mean that they aren't related in various ways. On most views a justified belief must be based on adequate justification, and the basing relation is often construed as causal.

³ See again Coady (1992). I'm not sure what precisely Coady's final view is. He sometimes seems to suggest that one can know a priori that testimony is generally reliable or at least prima facie credible (p. 96). In other places he seems only to suggest that testimony is a fundamental source of evidence on a par with perception and memory

(p. 145). I'll have more to say about the implicit distinction between fundamental and derivative sources of evidence in what follows.

⁴ See, for example, Brewer (1999).

⁵ See Fumerton (1995), (2004a) and (2004b) for an extended discussion of inferential internalism.

⁶ I have profited enormously and influenced heavily by Mike Huemer's (2002) thoughts on these matters.

⁷ The locution 'natural sign' is used by Addis (1989). A version of the view defended by Addis was defended by Bergmann (1964). And variations of it are defended by Fumerton (1985, 1995, 2002).

⁸ The expression 'magical' theory was coined by Putnam.

⁹ In characterizing the skepticism as extreme, I do not mean to diminish its threat.

¹⁰ With the emphasis on *analogous*. There are, of course, important differences between the quasi-logical relation of making probable that Keynes took to hold between propositions. From the fact that P entails Q it follows that the conjunction of P and any other proposition entails Q. From the fact that P makes probable Q it does not follow that the conjunction of P with any other proposition makes probable Q.

¹¹ By far the most sophisticated versions of reliabilism were put forth by Goldman (1979, 1986, 1988). Note the discussion of justification rules in Goldman (1986) and the similarity between that view and the view that takes epistemic probability to be defined statistically.

¹² Put another way, philosophers typically insist that for a belief that P to be justified by a belief that E, the belief that E must be based on the belief that E. If basing is to be

understood, at least partially, in causal terms, then if that actual cause of my belief that P involves far more than my belief that E it is misleading to suggest that my belief that P is based on my belief that E.

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