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WHY BELIEVE WHAT PEOPLE SAY?*

ABSTRACT. The basic alternatives seem to be either a Humean reductionist view that any particular assertion needs backing with inductive evidence for its reliability before it can rationally be believed, or a Reidian criterial view that testimony is intrinsically, though defeasibly, credible, in the absence of evidence against its reliability.

Some recent arguments from the constraints on interpreting any linguistic performances as assertions with propositional content have some force against the reductionist view. We thus have reason to accept the criterial view, at least as applied to eyewitness reports. But these considerations do not establish that any rational enquirer must have the concept of other minds or testimony. The logical possibility of the lone enquirer, who uses symbols and thereby expresses some knowledge of his world, remains open – but it is a question we have no need to pronounce upon.

The practice of accepting observation-statements is in fact extended to chains of testimonies believed to start in perception or in some other kind of justification, but the arguments for doing this are not so clear.

1.

Very often, the only answer one can give to the question 'How do you know?' is 'Someone told me so'. (Let us throughout this paper use the words *telling*, *saying*, and *testimony* in a sense wide enough to include the use of writing, print, telephone, radio, television, etc. – not just face-to-face conversation.) If we were not entitled thus to rely on testimony, each of us would know very much less than we think we do – only what one has seen for oneself, or what one can inductively support or deductively prove with one's unaided resources. With some claims one might, if one took enough trouble, check the matter out for oneself, and justify one's judgement by perception or proof. But in many other cases – such as assertions about the past, about present events too far away to be perceived, or about matters beyond one's scientific or mathematical competence – verification by the hearer is out of the question.

Our actual dependence on testimony is enormous, then. But when (if ever) is it reasonable to accept something because someone says so? I will concentrate on the first-person form of this question, looking not so much for conditions for the transmission of knowledge from A to B

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(formulated from the point of view of a third person, C), but asking from B's point of view what, if anything, can justify B in believing what A says. I first essay a brief history of the topic, and then I formulate some rival principles about the epistemology of testimony. I present an argument for the a priori but defeasible acceptability of testimony based on perception; I consider a limitation of this argument, and finally some possible extensions of it.

2.

One standard view of testimony is that no proposition can be justified merely by the fact that someone has asserted it, i.e., that testimony has no intrinsic or primary evidential force (unlike perception, memory, and induction, according to most theories of knowledge). But this cannot exclude the assembling of evidence that some *kinds* of testimonies are reliable and hence, justifiably believable on inductive grounds. If one finds that reports on certain kinds of topics or made in certain sorts of circumstances or by certain kinds of people tend to correlate well with the facts of the relevant matters whenever one investigates them for oneself, one might reasonably come to rely on those kinds of testimonies thereafter. This is what has been called the *reductionist* view of testimony – that it can earn justifying force only by inductive success.

There is an alternative account which we can label *criterial*, by which belief on the basis of testimony is reasonable, i.e., prima facie justified, by definition. According to an unrestricted version of this, whatever anyone says about anything is, in the absence of contra-indications, worthy of belief. It has been argued that if a speaker knows that P and says that P, then (under certain typical conditions) his hearer comes to know that P too.[1] According to a more restricted version, it is only in certain appropriate circumstances that A's asserting that P gives a good reason for believing it. For example, if it is known (or, at least, reasonably believed) that someone is or has been in a position to see something, this tends (unless overriden by other factors) to make their testimony about it credible. Eyewitness reports are treated in the courts, in historical enquiry, and in everyday life as having just such epistemic status, defeasibly justifying belief.

In the late medieval and renaissance periods there prevailed an epistemology which strongly emphasized the authority of testimony – at

least from recognized sources – but seemed to find *no* proper place for inductive argument. We have long since learned to ridicule the cast of mind for which what Aristotle said, or what is written in the Scriptures, carries *more* weight than what can be observed. There has been such a major change in world-view that it is hard for us to understand how such an epistemology could be followed by rational people. As Hacking has shown in the early chapters of his book *The Emergence of Probability* (1975), the very word *probable* once meant *approved of* or *attested to*, before our modern concept of probability as believability based on statistical evidence was developed. There was even a tendency to treat what we now call inductive evidence as a special kind of testimony – 'what Nature herself tells us' or 'what is written in the great book of the World' – which suggests the idea of a reverse reduction, namely, of induction to testimony. Remnants of this ancient conception perhaps survive in those uses of the words *sign* and *mean*, which analytic philosophers tend to find conceptually promiscuous – e.g., 'Red spots are a sign of measles' or 'Those dark clouds mean rain'. Our diagnosis of such usages as involving a primitive or 'natural' sense of 'sign' or 'meaning', quite distinct from that relevant to language proper, shows how the older view is not a serious candidate for us now: we live far on this side of the epistemological innovations of the seventeenth century, epitomized by Bacon and Descartes.

But in rejecting the medieval view, Descartes went to the opposite extreme; for in his *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations* he repudiates *all* reliance on the testimony of others and resolves to accept only what he can justify with his own unaided mental resources. "[A]s soon as my age allowed me to pass from under the control of my instructors", he tells us, "I entirely abandoned the study of letters, and resolved not to seek after any science but what might be found within myself or in the great book of the world" ([1637]/1954, Part One). "Letters" here seems to mean all the writings regarded as authoritative in the schools, and talk of "the great book of the world" must for him have become a dead metaphor. On Descartes's new individualistic approach, testimony can have evidential force only in a very secondary way, if at all.

Hume provides the classic example of this reductionist approach. At the beginning of the famous discussion of miracles in his first *Enquiry*, he claims that our assurance in any piece of testimony "is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnes-

ses". Where there is contrary evidence, such as conflicting testimony from someone else, or the bad record of the witness, or (as Hume is specially concerned to emphasize) from the sheer improbability or miraculous nature of the alleged fact, we qualify or entirely withhold our belief. "The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connexion, which we perceive a priori between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them" ([1748]/1962, Sec. 89).

In the *Treatise* Hume had already discussed in some detail our human propensities to believe. In one of the less frequently read sections (Bk. I Pt. III, Sec. IX) he wrote that "custom, to which I attribute all belief and reasoning, may operate upon the mind in invigorating an idea after *two* several ways" (my italics). One of these is that with which Hume's name will forevermore be associated – experience of constant conjunctions leading to habits of inference. But the other – most relevant here – is if "a mere idea alone . . . shou'd frequently make its appearance in the mind, this idea must by degrees acquire a facility and force. . . . The frequent repetition of any idea infixes it in the imagination" ([1739]/1888, p. 116). Hume adverts here to a tendency in human nature which is exploited by advertisers, governments, campaigners, and all parents and teachers who rely on authoritative assertion and repetition. But his attitude to it is not exactly parallel to his treatment of induction. Hume treats our tendency to base expectation on past experience as beyond criticism, though also beyond rational justification; but of belief in testimony he writes:

> No weakness of human nature is more universal and conspicuous than what we commonly call CREDULITY, or a too easy faith in the testimony of others. . . . When we receive any matter of fact upon human testimony, our faith arises from the very same origin as our inference from causes to effects, and from effects to causes; nor is there any thing but our *experience* of the governing principles of human nature, which can give us any assurance of the veracity of men. But tho' experience be the true standard of this, as well as of all other judgments, we seldom regulate ourselves entirely by it; but have a remarkable propensity to believe whatever is reported, even concerning apparitions, enchantments, and prodigies, however contrary to daily experience and observation. ([1739]/1888, pp. 112–13)

For Hume, then, our propensity to believe each other can and *should* be restrained, so to stay within the limits justified by experience of "the governing principles of human nature". Stated thus generally, this is an epistemological norm which everyone must surely accept – the word

'credulity', denoting a tendency to accept what goes *beyond* reasonable standards, expresses this. But it remains to be seen exactly what shape this norm should take, in particular whether it should require one to have positive evidence *for* someone's reliability before one is entitled to accept what he says.

A different approach is suggested in the work of Reid, Hume's compatriot, contemporary, and critic. In Chapter 6, Section XXIV of his *Inquiry into the Human Mind* ([1764]/1970), Reid claims to find a close analogy between "the testimony of nature given by the senses" and "human testimony given by language" (note how the former phrase echoes the renaissance view noted above). He thinks "the general principles of our constitution" which fit us to receive information by both these means are very similar. Piously, Reid says that "the wise and beneficent Author of our nature" has implanted in our natures two principles that tally with each other. One is a "propensity to speak truth": lying does violence to our nature, and requires art or training, inducement or temptation. The other is "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us". If it were not for this latter "principle of credulity" (by which label Reid must intend no criticism), children could never learn what they need to know. Reid's allusions to God could presumably be replaced by talk of evolution without substantial change to his epistemology.

Unlike Hume, Reid claims a parallel in epistemic status between this "principle of credulity" and what he calls "the inductive principle", namely, the human tendency to expect experienced constant conjunctions to be continued into the future. Given the uniformity of nature, inductive inference serves us well; and because of our propensity to speak truthfully to each other, our credulous tendencies also serve us well. In each case, truth is generally (though not always) attained: and in the absence of any contra-indication in any particular case, we may reasonably follow our natural tendencies to believe. For Reid, then, our acceptance of testimony is just as intellectually respectable as our inductive inferences. Admittedly, both need to be moderated by experience – each person finds out as he goes through life that certain kinds of testimonies are unreliable, and that some observed correlations are merely accidental. But Reid's position is that any assertion is creditworthy until shown otherwise; whereas Hume implies that specific evidence for its reliability is needed.

Many epistemologists have followed the Humean, reductionist ap-

proach. They have assumed that in a rational reconstruction of our knowledge, the subject must first justify belief in the external world by his own unaided resources before he can even begin to justify belief in other (rational) minds, or to argue (inductively?) that certain sounds or marks made by other bodies express assertions, or that the content of these assertions are (in some circumstances) likely to be true (see, for example, Ayer 1973, pp. 104–05). More recently, however, there has been a reaction towards a Reidian, criterial view of testimony. Such an approach is strongly suggested in many of Wittgenstein's remarks, posthumously published in *On Certainty* (1969): for example: "The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes *after* belief" (sec. 160); also "I believe what people transmit to me in a certain manner. In this way I believe geographical, chemical, historical facts etc. . . . And can it now be said: we accord credence in this way because it has proved to pay?" (sec. 170). A negative answer seems to be invited to this last question, rejecting the reductionist approach; but it is difficult to discern argumentative structure in these jottings of Wittgenstein's last days. Coady (1973) is a rare example of explicit argument against reductionism. Evans (1982, Ch. 5.2) suggests that a reorientation of traditional views of testimony is necessary both for a sound epistemology and a sound philosophy of language; but he, too, was not given the time to develop his thoughts on the topic.

3.

So much by way of preliminary identification of the options and their history: we must now address the substantive question of how good are the arguments on either side. But we must first try to formulate more precisely the rival a priori principles about when the acceptance of testimony is defeasibly justified. How should the criterial view be best formulated? If it were suggested that:

> If B hears and understands A say that p,
> then B is justified in believing that p;

the obvious objection would be that if I have reason to suspect my informant may be lying, then I would not be justified in believing him. But if I think him sincere in his assertion, or at least have no reason to suspect his insincerity, is that enough? Could we accept:

If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
then B is justified in believing that p?

This would be far too liberal. One obvious reason is that whenever I have strong independent evidence against P, I can hardly be right to believe P just because A said so. P may go strikingly counter to (what have been widely taken to be) well-known particular facts (consider, for example, the allegation that Hitler did not authorize the 'Final Solution'). Or P may be miraculous, inconsistent with highly confirmed laws of nature (for example, the doctrine of virgin birth). This of course is the Humean point that if someone asserts something incompatible with what there is strong reason to believe, the testimony cannot outweigh the counter-evidence already possessed, unless one can make a rational case that it is more probable that that evidence is flawed than that one's informant is mistaken. Suppose we add a third clause as follows:

If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no evidence against p,
then B is justified in believing that p.

This is surely too liberal also, for even where one has no evidence against what one is told, one may have good reason to doubt the reliability of one's informant, that is, the likelihood that what he or she says about the matter is likely to be true (however sincerely they assert it). If someone claims to read in my palm that I will fall in love with a brown-eyed stranger in my fiftieth year, I can adduce no very good evidence *against* the content of that prediction – it is, for all I know, entirely within the bounds of psychological possibility – but I think I have excellent reason for saying that *nobody*, not even Gypsy Rose Lee herself, can have any justification for such predictions. Often the reasons for doubting reliability are more specific to one's informant. If my window-cleaner gives me a tip that a certain share is going to rise rapidly, I would be well-advised not to give much credence, or invest much money, on that basis; but if someone with inside knowledge of the company tells me – or if it is revealed that the window-cleaner is privy to such knowledge – then the epistemological and financial situation might well be different.

Consider then the following formulation of a criterial epistemology of testimony:

(TC) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no evidence against p,
(iv) B has no reason to think that A's belief about p is not justified,
then B is justified in believing that p.

This represents a criterial view which is unrestricted as to subject matter: whatever anyone asserts about anything may be accepted, provided one knows of nothing counting against it, their sincerity in saying it, or the reliability of this person's beliefs on this topic. The justification is eminently defeasible, of course – for example, the very next person one meets may tell one the exact opposite – but that is no surprise: we are only in the market for defeasible guidance here.

The reductionist view, in contrast, demands more than the mere absence of doubt about the reliability of the speaker: it requires that one have positive evidence in favour. The criterial approach treats testimony as 'innocent' (i.e., trustworthy) unless shown guilty; the reductionist treats it as 'guilty' (i.e., not worthy of belief) until a good track-record is shown. Here is a first shot at formulating the principle behind the reductionist approach:

(Tr) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no other evidence for or against p,
then B is justified in believing that p *if and only if* B has reason to think that A's belief about p is justified.

The 'only if' is needed to distinguish the reductionist approach from the criterial, for the latter can happily accept that evidence for the speaker's reliability can be sufficient to justify acceptance; what is in dispute is whether it is necessary. The introduction of 'only if' into the conclusion requires the inclusion of 'for' into (iii).

(Tr) is still importantly ambiguous, however. On an extreme reductionist view, the required evidence should be completely *available to B*, consisting only in correlations between B's hearing of assertions by A (and/or others) and B's own observations of the relevant facts; there should be no reliance on testimony in assembling this purely inductive

evidence. But, on a less stringent view, B would be allowed, in assessing A's reliability, to depend on the testimony of C, and perhaps many others. For example, if little Johnny cries 'Wolf', I might be able to justify believing him by appeal to a number of cases in which, prompted by just such a cry from him, I have seen a wolf myself: I would thus meet the stronger requirement. But it might be that I could only satisfy the weaker one, for example, by relying on the word of Johnny's older sister Janey that in her experience he has been a reliable wolf-detector. Of course, I might have checked out *Janey's* wolf-recognitional skills for myself, but, there again, I could take her mother's word for it; or I might be confident about Janey's wolf-reports on the grounds of her perceptual competence with *other* animals, or other things generally (whether demonstrated or reported). In the light of such possibilities, the very strong requirement mooted above does not seem very attractive.

But the spirit of the reductionist approach remains that all justified reliance on testimony is at bottom a complex kind of induction – one is not to believe what someone says *just* because they say it, but only when one can assemble an empirical argument that what they say is likely to be true. One may appeal to other testimony to support belief in these correlations, but only in so far as it is itself supportable in similar fashion. There can thus be a regress of dependence, justifying A's testimony, or that of people like A, or testimony about topics like P, by appeal to the testimony of B, or of people of a kind which B exemplifies, or about topics like Q. But the reductionist idea is that this regress must be finite: to justify accepting another's assertion, it must terminate in correlations between sayings and facts, *both of which one has oneself observed*. Thus in building up knowledge of the world, or in rationally reconstructing justification for the beliefs one already has, one may proceed through a number of layers of dependence on testimony; but at no stage can one justify a belief *merely* because someone has told one so, even if one has no evidence against it or against the informant's reliability. To express this reductionist view we need to strengthen (**Tr**) somewhat as follows:

(TR) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no other evidence for or against p,
then B is justified in believing that p *if and only if* B has

evidence that A's beliefs on matters such as p are likely to be true; and if that evidence involves appeal to other testimony, B must have evidence for the reliability of those informants' beliefs, and any such regress of evidence must end in inductive correlations involving only what B has himself observed.[2]

Reid's analogy between testimony and perception can now be expressed by comparing (**TC**) with the following principle for the defeasible acceptability of perceptual experience:

(P) If B seems to perceive that p,
B has no evidence against p,
B has no reason to doubt the reliability of her perceptual faculties,
then B is justified in believing p.

And while we are about it, we can formulate similar defeasible principles governing memory and induction:

(M) If B seems to remember that p,
B has no evidence against p,
B has no reason to doubt the reliability of his own memory,
then B is justified in believing p.

(I) If every time B has observed an event of type F, she has soon thereafter observed an event of type G,
and B observes another F,
and B has no reason not to expect a G this time,
then B is justified in believing that another G will soon occur.

But to formulate epistemic principles is not to accept them, let alone to argue for them. Scepticism about perception, memory, and induction can take precisely the form of questioning whether we should accept even the defeasible principles (**P**), (**M**), and (**I**). And there are interesting questions whether these three have to be accepted together as a conceptually interdependent package, or whether one might accept (**P**) without the others, or (**P**) and (**M**) without (**I**). (There does seem to be an undeniable presupposition of (**P**) by (**M**), and of (**M**) by (**I**).) Our topic here, however, is not these well-worked issues of epistemology but

the less-discussed one of the epistemic status of testimony. Let us assume, then, for the sake of argument in this paper, that **(P)**, **(M)**, and **(I)** are not only generally accepted (as they surely are, implicitly at least), but can be rationally defended against sceptical attacks. Our question now is: What is their relation to testimony? Does the acceptance of **(P)**, **(M)**, and **(I)** somehow involve accepting the analogous **(TC)**, or is the way left open for the rival **(TR)** – or need one accept either?

Should we accept **(TC)** merely on the strength of this analogy with **(P)**, **(M)**, and **(I)**? Or is there an *argument* that shows the reductionist approach **(TR)** to be wrong? Welbourne (1986, Ch. 5.4) argues for the incoherence of the idea of an articulate Crusoe who holds that knowledge is *not* transmissible by testimony. He says: "[I]n denying application for the concept of commonable knowledge, our self-sufficient knower denies application for a concept of knowledge which he requires for his own conception of himself as a being enduring though time" (1986, p. 62). The argument seems to be that if one accepts **(M)** – as one surely must if one is not to be reduced to a solipsism of the present moment – one ought to accept **(TC)** as well. But why, exactly? Welbourne writes:

> This is not just a point about parity of reasoning as applied to testimony and memory, important as that is. It goes deeper. It is a point about the concept of knowledge which underlies both our notion of memory and our practice of telling the facts, and exposes them to parallel treatment. This is a concept of something which is not bound to a particular time or to a particular mind. Other people's knowledge and knowledge from past times may be available to me now. (1986, p. 63)

This sounds plausible. Certainly, it is part of our actual conception of knowledge that any item of knowledge can be retained through time (in memory, and also in writing, tape-recordings, etc.), and can be transmitted from one person to another by appropriate say-so. But Welbourne is looking for something rather stronger than this: he wants a transcendental deduction of the concept of commonable knowledge, an argument that will establish it de jure not merely de facto, by showing that any conception of knowledge must involve its transmissibility across time and between people. However, it is not clear that this aim is achieved by the remarks just quoted. We may (unless we are believers in the possibility of a private language in the Wittgensteinian sense) accept that any one item of knowledge must in principle be possessible at different times, and by different people. But our

individualist enquirer need not deny that. He can just say that whatever other minds there are must go through the same sorts of self-sufficient knowledge-gathering processes as he himself, if they are to gain the knowledge that he has. They cannot just get it second-hand from him, nor can he get it via them. If knowledge is *possessible by more than one person*, that does not imply that it is *transmissible by testimony*. Crusoe stories are not essential to show this: someone brought up normally, believing most of what his parents and teachers tell him, may nevertheless claim, like Descartes, that proper epistemic standards should forgo reliance on testimony (except in a secondary, inductive way). Admitting the facts about his own intellectual biography, he may say that a rational reconstruction of whatever he is really justified in believing must take a systematically individualistic form. There might still be something deeply incoherent about this, but we have yet to see it shown. We do not yet have anything like a proof that (**TC**) is implied by (**P**), (**M**), and (**I**); but neither do we have any argument that it is inconsistent with them.

4.

Could we then accept (**P**), (**M**), and (**I**), but with (**TR**) rather than (**TC**)? This would yield the radical first-person epistemology just mooted, according to which one would have to start making observations about the world without any help from others. But note that it is a striking consequence of this that one would have to learn the very *meanings* of the terms in which one is to make observation-statements (or acquire the *concepts* with which to formulate perceptual judgments) without any teaching. For if, at the stage of learning meanings or concepts, one were to accept another's statement that something is green (or circular, or bitter-tasting, or an interval of an octave) as normatively guiding what one ought to say oneself, one would thereby be assuming that they can correctly recognize green things, etc. (or are reasonably reliable in doing so, in favourable circumstances at least). One would thus be taking it for granted that their assertions about colour, etc., are true (or likely to be so). But at such a stage one could of course be in no position to verify the truth of others' assertions, since one does not yet know the meaning of the crucial terms.

To avoid all reliance on what other people say, one would thus have to come to use words meaningfully without benefit of teaching. One

need not be physically isolated – one might grow up in the company of others, depending on them materially and emotionally, but one would have to be *linguistically* self-sufficient. Note that this does not involve a private language in Wittgenstein's sense – he had in mind terms which nobody else *could* understand, because they supposedly referred to mental states which nobody else could know about (1953, sec. 243), whereas what we are envisaging here are words for *publicly perceptible states of affairs*, whose meanings someone teaches himself, but which might come to be shared by others. Our normal, shared language would be seen as made up of a huge number of in principle, isolatable idiolects.

But can an individual somehow set up for himself a standard of correctness? Without a distinction between correct and incorrect uses there can be no meaning – that is agreed on all sides: so if all such normativity must involve appeal to the practice of a community, it seems we would have a proof that reliance on testimony is justified in something like the way (**TC**) says. But is it so obvious, on reflection, that a wolf-child, isolated from birth, could not give meanings to symbols? Many followers of Wittgenstein think he demonstrated the social nature of all language use. But in the *Investigations* he seems to have subtly steered away from offering any direct answer to our question.[3] He wrote: "It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule" (1953, sec. 199); but he did not in that text explicitly exclude the possibility of one *person* engaging in a rule-following practice. In unpublished notes, he did allow that an articulate Crusoe, isolated from birth, is conceivable.[4] If there is any deep-lying incoherence in the supposition of a completely self-taught idiolect, it has not yet been demonstrated.

The problem for (**TR**), if there is one, seems to lie elsewhere. If our lone enquirer is to begin to amass the inductive evidence which (**TR**) says he needs before he may begin to accept even one piece of testimony, he has to establish correlations between *others' assertions* that p, and the fact of p as observed by himself. But to do this, he has to know which noises or marks made by others constitute assertions that p, and so he has to be able to know that some other minds are using symbols with certain meanings. We are primarily concerned here with observation sentences of the simplest type, which express recognition of perceptible states of affairs, where the crucial word (e.g., 'bitter') can only be explained with the aid of perception of typical samples (or

if a verbal definition is possible, it uses terms which must themselves be explained ostensively). How could our lone enquirer know that someone means 'That is bitter' by a pattern of sounds they sometimes emit? Only, surely, by finding that that noise is (fairly reliably) made only when tasting samples which the enquirer himself recognizes as bitter. Thus one cannot justify interpreting certain performances as observation-statements, i.e., as testimony about what someone perceives, without already committing oneself to the assumption that such statements are reliable, likely to be true.[5]

The moral is that one cannot be in the position which (**TR**) requires, namely, that one could first identify the content of other people's assertions, and only then begin to assemble evidence to decide which of them is likely to be true. But of course this leaves ample room for the detection of errors and lies. And we had better not be too sanguine that these must be merely occasional: it seems conceivable (contrary to what some philosophers have argued[6]) that even a majority of a certain kind of observation-statement made in a community could be false, if there is an explanation of this in terms of a widespread but subtle cause of perceptual illusion (fool's gold might be more frequently met than the real thing), or a very common motive for lying (fear of the ruling party might make people swear that snow is black – despite Tarski). But to make sense of such massive errors we have to suppose that the speakers *would* correct them, given certain changes in scientific knowledge or political power – and we surely have to support such counterfactuals with factual evidence about what they *have* said in a variety of actual cases. Of course, on *non*-observational matters (of scientific theory, cosmology, historical legend, religious or political dogmas) nothing we have said excludes the possibility that the testimony of a whole society, even over a lengthy epoch, might be largely or entirely false. All we have claimed is that in *observable* matters, testimony is believable in the a priori but defeasible way that (**TC**) expresses. We have in effect argued for the following principle:

(TCP) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no evidence against p,
(iv) B has reason to believe that A has perceived the state of affairs which would make p true or false,

then B is justified in believing that p.

If successful, our argument shows that anyone who has the concept of testimony must accept principle (**TCP**). There is an obvious connection between testimony and other minds – or, at least, other *rational* minds, ones capable of making and expressing judgments about the world. We are not concerned here with sub-human mentality, where there are sensations and perceptions but no capacity for judgment ('sensibility' without 'understanding', as Kant would put it). Anyone who has the concept of other rational minds therefore has the concept of testimony. Conversely, anyone who has the idea of testimony obviously has the idea of a subject or author of it, i.e., of a rational mind other than himself. He is surely committed to the following principle for the attribution of beliefs to others:

(OM) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
then B is justified in believing that A believes that p.

As with the other principles above, the defeasibility built into this one is obviously necessary – for if A is a plausible rogue, he may not believe what he says, despite every appearance of sincerity. But it seems that accepting such a principle is part of what it is to have the concepts of assertion, belief, and other rational minds. We thus have an argument that anyone who has the concept of testimony must accept at least (**TCP**) and (**OM**). There is a package of concepts and principles here which must be purchased together, if accepted at all.

5.

The preceding argument does not, however, show that any rational being must have the concepts of testimony and of other minds. Could there not be a wolf-child, isolated since birth from all human contact, who develops a practice of using symbols to refer to features of his environment, thus recording knowledge for his own use without even conceiving of other minds? Some philosophers think this impossible. Welbourne, for one, has argued that the very concept of knowledge involves an essentially communal element:

> [T]here is no state of *Percy* which we could isolate and which, when it is the case that p, is his knowing that p, different from and superior to his merely believing that p.

> . . . . knowledge is not primarily a property of individuals as such, but only in so far as they are members of some actual or possible community. (1986, pp. 74–75)

(The point might also be applied to justified belief, if it can be argued that justification is an equally social notion.) Kripke (1982, p. 89) has famously made a similar claim about rule-following or meaning. Both refuse to offer any truth-conditional analysis of what it is for an individual to mean or know something, but allude instead to our practices of *treating* people as competent speakers, or as knowledgeable. For Kripke, one who passes relevant practical tests in his use of a word, responding in the way that most of the community do, will be "admitted as a normal speaker of the language and member of the community" (1982, p. 92). For Welbourne, a community of knowledge is thought to be extensible by teaching: science, he says, "will owe its claim to be knowledge at all to the fact that it involves . . . a consensus among rational people that this and this and this may properly be taught as fact" (1986, pp. 57–58).

These communitarian theses tend to weaken under pressure, however. Kripke wrote: "[*I*]*f* we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule-following to him" (1982, p. 110). And although Welbourne says "[w]e must presume, I suppose, that Adam, having named the beasts, knew their names before he taught them to Eve" (1986, p. 75), he quickly goes on to admit a contrary temptation to say that whatever Adam had in his allegedly solitary existence did not *become* knowledge until Eve appeared on the scene. Both philosophers (like Wittgenstein before them) betray a certain hesitation on the point.

We surely have to allow that a lone survivor of nuclear holocaust could continue to use language, could retain and acquire knowledge, and might invent some new words for unfamiliar features of his environment. But the intelligibility of all this is too closely associated with his previous social life. The crucial question for our present purpose is whether someone could have knowledge of the physical world without having any concept of other people. Could there be a subject who simply follows (**P**), (**M**), and (**I**)? This still does not involve privacy in Wittgenstein's sense: for the facts known by our imagined solipsist are publicly accessible states of affairs.

Davidson (1984, p. 170) has argued that a creature cannot have belief without understanding the possibility of being mistaken, and that the

difference between truth and error "can emerge only in the context of interpretation" (i.e., interpreting the speech of others). Welbourne also argues that individual belief presupposes the concept of 'commonable' knowledge, because belief aspires to *objective* truth, which is true not only for the believer, but *for anyone.*[7]

> Objectivity and communicability are really two faces of one coin. . . . It is only in so far as we can grasp the idea of getting information from others that we can have the idea of objective truth which inspires the Cartesian enquirer. (1986, p. 81)

But here again there is a gap which the stubborn Cartesian can refuse to cross without further inducement. Can there not be room for objectivity by appeal to possible changes of view over *time*, giving criteria for a seems/is distinction, without going outside the single enquirer? Can't this give the requisite dimension of objectivity for his practice to count as forming and justifying beliefs?

It might be suggested that to mean or know anything our lone individual must *think of himself* as doing so, and that he could not do that without being able to think of *another* mind as meaning or knowing what he does. But once again, it is not obvious that the premise here is true. A child may mean and know quite a bit, without – it may seem – yet having the *concepts* of meaning and knowledge, or applying them to himself. Pettit has recently argued that thinking involves not just having beliefs and desires but also intentionally shaping them to conform to various norms. Rule-following is thus said to involve more than representational content. According to Pettit, it must be "in a certain sense interactive. It requires that the rule-following subject be in a position to interact with other bearers of the inclination – or a counterpart – at work in her: her self at later times or other persons" (1990, p. 17). But that disjunction still allows the possibility of a rule-following wolf-child, who could "interact only with her earlier self" (that curious phrase presumably means that she can amend her previously recorded judgements in the light of subsequent experience).

Pettit claims, however, that one can only *know* that someone is following a rule or norm if one interacts with the person in the appropriate way, namely, seeking explanation of divergent applications in terms of something abnormal about the conditions. If so, if we are to be justified in saying that a child means and knows various things, we would have to have done more than observe her through a psychologist's one-way screen, we must have interacted with her and found her language

use to be in crucial ways responsive to ours. These interactions will presumably involve her treating some of what we say (e.g., about what we can see) as believable, so she would be accepting testimony, and would have a concept of other minds.[8]

But, yet again, where exactly is the argument for this? Pettit claims that if a putative rule-follower "identifies the rule on the basis of an inclination that is only intertemporally standardized" and "has no expectation that others will display convergent responses", then I cannot know that he is really following a rule, because "I cannot reliably tell that he is following one rule rather than another. . . . Were our responses to come apart, he might remain quite content with his own responses to the example" (1990, p. 19). Certainly, I cannot *infallibly* tell what rule he is following by noting his response to any finite number of examples. But infallibility is surely too strict a standard for knowledge. Could I not *reliably* tell, in that observing the lone individual's responses to a fair number and variety of cases could give good inductive reason to think he is following the same rule as me, even though I have not attempted any interaction? And if we do come to interact and 'standardize' our responses over a number of cases, how does that give me any greater assurance, any more than inductive warrant, for believing that our responses will not inexplicably diverge in some new case?

We have not found any conclusive argument to rule out the idea of a forever isolated rule-follower and knowledge-seeker. But so what? Why should we expend so much mental effort pursuing the question of the mere logical possibility of these shadowy creatures of myth and philosophical fantasy – Adam before the creation of Eve, a Crusoe isolated from birth, the articulate wolf-child, the solipsist with no concept of other minds? All the evidence goes to show not merely the non-existence of such beings but also their psychological impossibility; everything we know about human mental and linguistic development points to the essentially social, thoroughly interactive nature of the process. Such real-life wolf-children as have been documented have had to be *taught* language, with more difficulty than normal.

Since actual cases of articulate Crusoes have not come up, we have not had to decide what to say about them. And, on reflection, we can see that there is no reason why our concepts of meaning, knowledge, rule-following, etc., should somehow have built-in guidance for how to apply them to cases never before encountered. (The point is a quite

general one about concepts, of course.) If so, it would be foolish to expect there to be some decisive answer waiting to be revealed by sufficiently clever and diligent philosophical analysis.[9] But this essentialist sort of methodology, however hallowed by philosophical tradition since Plato, seems by no means compulsory, especially since the possibility of 'family resemblance' concepts has been brought to philosophical consciousness.

Our actual conceptions of meaning and knowledge involve not only the principles (**P**), (**M**), and (**I**), but also (**TCP**) and (**OM**). If persistent criticism of the arguments so far on offer appears to leave open the logical possibility of a kind of mentality involving only the first three, that suggests there may be a fault-line running down the middle of our actual conceptions of meaning and knowledge – and we thereby learn something of theoretical interest at least. But if the pressures of reality never pull the blocks apart, we have no need to change the conceptual structures we have built on them, or to formulate plans for contingencies which will almost certainly never happen.

6.

Returning closer to our actual conceptions, it will be noticed that the one principle about testimony which we have so far argued for, namely (**TCP**), is very restricted in scope, applying only to what can reasonably be believed to be 'first-hand', eyewitness reports. In practice we accept much other testimony: even on perceptible matters we believe claims, for example about the distant past, which may be based on a lengthy chain of oral transmission. In an uncontroversial sort of case, C will accept what B says, because B says that A saw it happen and told B about it. Can we find a principle which justifies this, without being over-liberal? The problem is how much each member of a chain is supposed to know (or reasonably believe) about the nature of the links, for the chain to count as transmitting knowledge (or justification). To require knowledge of the *members* of any such chain, or memory of the *occasions* on which they did their transmission, would be hopelessly unrealistic. Most of us quickly forget from whom, and when, we learnt most of what we (think we) know. Let us therefore try generalizing (**TCP**) as follows:

(TCPG) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no evidence against p,
(iv) B has reason to believe that there is a chain of testimony behind A's belief that p, the first member of which has perceived the state of affairs which would make p true or false,
then B is justified in believing that p.

We are here using the notion of a chain of testimony in an obvious way (when A is himself the witness, this can be counted as a special case of the general formula, in which the chain has only one member). There will frequently be situations where there is more than one chain behind an assertion, but clause (iv) allows for this by requiring only the reasonable belief that at least one such chain be perceptually grounded. **(TCPG)** leaves the notion of 'good reason' deliberately vague, but in that respect is no worse off than all the other formulations we have been considering.

Perception is one main source of epistemic authority, one generator of knowledge to be transmitted down the lines of memory and testimony – but there are others, such as mathematical proof, or scientific theorizing in the light of observational evidence. (And some epistemologists may, controversially, want to add more, such as ethical or aesthetic 'intuition' or informed judgment, perhaps even religious experience.) May we therefore generalize further, to allow any justified belief to start a chain, as follows?

(TCG) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no evidence against p,
(iv) B has reason to believe that there is a chain of testimony behind A's belief that p, the first member of which was justified in believing that p,
then B is justified in believing that p.

But if we do this, have we still got anything that deserves the name of a criterial view? **(TCG)** might be said to be somewhat reductionist in spirit, in requiring evidence in favour of the reliability of the relevant chain of testimony. Consider, finally, the following more criterial principle which requires only the absence of negative evidence:

(T) If (i) B hears and understands A say that p,
(ii) B has no reason to doubt A's sincerity,
(iii) B has no evidence against p,
(iv) B has no reason to doubt that there is a chain of testimony behind A's belief that p, the first member of which was justified in believing that p,
then B is justified in believing that p.

There may not, in fact, be very much difference in practice between (**TCG**) and (**T**) – clause (iv) of each, if satisfied at all, may come down to not much more than a vague impression of the general, quite unspecific likelihood of there being an appropriate chain behind most human assertions. (**T**) bears a close analogy to our principle (**M**) governing memory: which is surely appropriate, since memory and testimony are both ways of transmitting knowledge (or justified belief), not ways of generating it in the first place. (**T**) would appear to be something like the principle which most of us unconsciously follow most of the time; but that is hardly a justification for it. Whether any better support can be found is a topic for further enquiry.

NOTES

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[1] See Welbourne (1986), Ross (1986), and McDowell (1980, end of Sec. 7).

[2] To extend the application of (**TC**) and (**TR**) to the many cases where some evidence for or against P has *already* been gathered, one would have to start talking of *degrees* of justification, and of the extent to which these may get altered by new testimony. But perhaps we can be spared the attempt to go into these details until the fundamentals of the topic have been more firmly established.

[3] As Pears has carefully documented in *The False Prison* (1988, Ch. 14).

[4] See Baker and Hacker (1985, Ch. IV.4).

[5] Coady (1973) makes the point with reference to Martians, but it surely applies to all other minds, from the point of view of our lone enquirer.

[6] Shoemaker (1963, p. 230) said "[i]t is a necessary truth, not an inductively discovered generalization, that the mere fact that a statement has been sincerely and confidently asserted by someone as a perceptual or memory statement gives *some* reason for believing it to be true", which expresses the kind of a priori, but defeasible, approach I am putting forward here. But he also claimed to be able to establish the stronger claim that such statements are true more often than not.

[7] Unwin (1987) proposes to qualify this by restricting the range of 'anyone' to those with

the same kind of cognitive processing mechanism as the believer, but I have argued (1988) that we must extend it to any rational being who can understand the content of the belief, even if their physiology and psychology be different.

[8] This still leaves open the mere logical possibility that someone devoid of all interpersonal interaction could be rule-following. Kripke's rather mysterious talk of "taking Crusoe into our community" may now seem appropriate after all, if the underlying thought is that interaction with him is needed before we can justifiably *call* him a rule-follower.

[9] In her study of the epistemology of testimony, Fricker conceives a philosophical account of knowledge as taking the form of "a general conception K of what it takes for a belief to be knowledge, which applies to all beliefs of any individual, whatever their subject matter, and regardless of how they were acquired" (1987, p. 62).

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