

Knowledge Without Uptake: Rational Withholding in Testimony

Phi 525
Zhuo Lan

Statement on AI Use:

I used ChatGPT to assist with translation and grammar correction. All substantive ideas, arguments, and interpretations of the course material are entirely my own.

Introduction

Testimonial knowledge is often understood in terms of transmission: if a speaker knows that *p*, a hearer forms a belief that *p* based on the speaker's testimony, and the hearer has no undefeated first-order defeaters, then the hearer should also be able to know that *p*. On this picture, the speaker's epistemic position creates a default route along which knowledge is passed to the hearer. Related entitlement-based views, such as Burge's Acceptance Principle ([Burge 1993](#)), hold that when there are no stronger reasons to doubt, a rational hearer is initially entitled to accept what an apparently competent speaker says, so ordinary testimony usually allows for rational uptake. In different ways, these theories tend to treat the conditions under which the speaker has knowledge as the same as the conditions under which that knowledge can be passed on to a hearer.

This paper questions that assumption. I argue that understanding testimonial knowledge requires distinguishing two epistemic statuses that are often treated as the same. Possessed knowledge (*K*-possess) is about whether the speaker's belief is well supported by her own first-order epistemic route. Communicable knowledge (*K*-comm) is about whether that knowledge is available to a specific hearer given the hearer's total evidence, including higher-order information about the speaker's recent performance or reliability. If we collapse these two statuses, we face a forced choice: either we deny that some fully competent speakers know what they clearly ought to count

as knowing, or we must label some fully responsible hearers as irrational merely because they respond to their higher-order evidence. Either way, our theory distorts the epistemic standing of one party in order to preserve a simplified picture of transmission.

A more detailed version of the Heron Case illustrates this. In the case, the speaker's belief is perceptually well grounded and counts as knowledge under ordinary conditions. But the hearer, who must rely on his own limited perception and on recent evidence of the speaker's inconsistent performance, faces higher-order defeaters that make withholding the most responsible choice. These defeaters do not affect K-possess, but they remove K-comm. The knowledgeable speaker therefore cannot transmit knowledge to a fully rational hearer even in a non-deceptive environment. Recognizing this cross-subject asymmetry not only clarifies a distinctive kind of testimonial failure; it also shows why a two-status framework: K-possess and K-comm, is needed if we are to respect both sides of the testimonial exchange without misclassifying either speakers or hearers.

1. The Core Case: The Heron Case

Consider the following ordinary field situation. Hua, an experienced visitor to her local wetland, has developed a fast, unreflective capacity to recognize common wading birds. Her judgment relies on familiar shape-stance-habitat cues such as leg length, posture, plumage, and typical water depth. Call this her *recognitional method*: a rapid, non-inferential perceptual ability.

On a clear afternoon, she looks toward a shallow pool and forms the belief "That's a heron," drawing on her familiar perceptual cues: long legs, upright stance, grey-blue plumage, and the distinctive neck posture herons adopt when feeding. In this environment and under these conditions, her recognitional method is highly reliable across nearby situations, as shown by her long-standing accuracy in cases in the same habitat and season with normal lighting and distance

and without unusual distortions. The belief is true, and she would not easily have been mistaken. She thus has *possession-knowledge* (K-possess): knowledge grounded in a reliably functioning recognitional ability in relevantly similar conditions.

Du, viewing the same scene, cannot distinguish the species from his angle and distance; he sees only a tall greyish wader. In the past several weeks, Hua has made a few errors in this very task-type, for example, mistaking egrets for juvenile herons and once taking a partially submerged log for a resting bird under similar lighting conditions. Du does not distrust Hua in general and acknowledges her local expertise but given this recent pattern in the same task-type, he judges that withholding rather than uptake is the more rational response.

Testimonial transmission therefore fails: Hua knows (K-possess), but Du withholds acceptance, so *communicable knowledge* (K-comm) does not obtain.

2. Why the Speaker Knows

This section briefly shows that, on standard accounts of knowledge, it is highly plausible that Hua knows that the bird is a heron. The question of possession-knowledge is not the main point of pressure in the Heron Case. What matters for the purposes of this paper is simply that S's epistemic position is strong enough that the subsequent failure of testimonial uptake cannot be attributed to her ignorance or unreliability.

2.1 Externalism

(A) Causal Theory

On [Goldman's causal theory \(1967\)](#), S knows that p if p is true, S believes that p, and the fact that p appropriately causes her belief. In the present case, the causal chain is straightforward:

the actual heron in front of Hua caused her visual perception, which in turn activated her well-established recognition skill, producing the belief that the animal is a heron. The case explicitly excludes deviant causal routes such as illusions, recordings, hypnosis, or hearsay, so the causal connection qualifies as appropriate.

One might object that Hua's recent errors render the causal chain behind her belief inappropriate. But causal accounts evaluate only the causal sequence that produces the present belief, not an agent's historical reliability. Importing such considerations would effectively turn the causal theory into a reliabilist assessment. It is therefore more plausible to hold that Hua knows on causal grounds, even though her testimony still fails to generate uptake.

(B) Reliabilism

On [Goldman's reliabilism \(1979\)](#), S knows that p if (i) p is true, (ii) S believes that p , and (iii) S's belief is produced by a cognitive process type that is reliable in the relevant conditions. In the present case, the process type can be specified in a fine-grained manner as Hua's rapid perceptual recognition in her familiar wetland environment under normal lighting and distance, using shape-stance-habitat cues. This process type has a stable success rate across nearby situations (N) and is not prone to error under the present conditions. Hence, reliabilism straightforwardly yields K-possession.

It is important to use a fine-grained process type in evaluating Hua's belief. Coarse classifications, for example, describing her method as "intuition", would group together perceptual judgments made under very different environmental conditions, such as variations in lighting, distance, and familiarity with the habitat. Treating these heterogeneous circumstances as instances of a single process would make the reliability assessment arbitrary. Under a fine-grained description, however, Hua's method is reliable in the present environment.

2.2 Internalism

(A) Individual coherence

From Hua's first-person perspective, her belief that "this is a heron" fits smoothly with her present perceptual experience and her long-term familiarity with the wetland habitat. If she does not recall her recent mistakes in similar identification tasks, then nothing in her internal perspective gives her a reason to doubt her current judgment; the belief therefore remains well-justified from within her own evidential outlook. If she does remember those recent errors, it is understandable that she feels some hesitation, since past misidentifications may reduce her confidence in this instance. Yet this hesitation concerns her self-assessment rather than the perceptual evidence itself. Her current experience still strongly supports the belief, and her recognition skill is working reliably on this occasion.

(B) Social coherence

Although Hua's current judgment is unreflective, she can later articulate publicly accessible cues, such as the bird's long neck, posture, shallow-water stance, and grey-blue plumage. These features make her belief reviewable in a way that satisfies internalist expectations of transparency and social mutuality. From the social standpoint, her belief is in principle justifiable to others.

3. Why the Hearer Rationally Withholds Testimony

3.1 Withholding as Norm-Governed, Not Accidental

Du's withholding in the Heron Case is not a quirky reaction to the contingent details of one afternoon in the marsh. It is shaped by familiar norms about how hearers should respond to testimony if they want their beliefs to be well-supported by their total evidence. In this subsection,

I focus on two such norms: a norm of performance-based adjustment and a norm against epistemic rashness. Together, they show that Du's withholding is not an irrational deviation from good practice, but a natural application of standards that many accounts of testimony already presuppose.

(A) Norm of performance-based adjustment

On [Lackey's evidentialist account of testimony \(2008, pp. 31-38\)](#), a hearer's justification for accepting testimony depends in part on her evidence concerning the speaker's reliability in the relevant domain, including the speaker's observable track record in that task-type. On this evidential approach, I propose that the most informative indicators of a speaker's present reliability are her recent, context-matched performances, rather than an undifferentiated long-run history. Recent successes and failures provide higher-order evidence about whether the speaker's ability is currently functioning normally.

The point can be illustrated by a simple example. Suppose a mathematics tutor has been highly accurate over many years but has made several basic algebra mistakes in the last two days due to fatigue. When a student is deciding whether to trust the tutor's answer on the next algebra problem, it is rational to give greater weight to the tutor's recent errors than to the long-run record, because the recent pattern is a better indicator of the tutor's *current* reliability for this task.

Applied to the Heron Case, Du's attention to Hua's recent misidentifications in the same environment and task-type is therefore not arbitrary. It reflects the ordinary evidential adjustment that follows from treating recent task-specific performance as the most informative guide to a speaker's current reliability.

(B) Norm of avoiding epistemic rashness

Risk-sensitive approaches in epistemology, such as those developed by [Pritchard \(2005\)](#), hold that the rationality of relying on a belief-forming process depends not only on its reliability

but also on the *risk* involved in forming a false belief. When the potential cost of error is significant, a cautious attitude, such as withholding of judgment, is rationally recommended even when the speaker is generally competent.

But even in low-stakes settings, higher-order considerations can support a similar form of caution. On dominance-style reasoning about higher-order evidence (Elga 2007; Christensen 2010), uptake introduces an epistemic liability: the possibility of forming a false belief, whereas withholding postpones commitment and typically carries a lower epistemic cost. Although withholding may delay the acquisition of knowledge, the cost of error is often epistemically worse than the temporary absence of belief, since false beliefs tend to propagate downstream distortions within one's inquiry (Pritchard 2005). Thus, even when nothing practically important hangs on the issue, withholding may still be a rational response to uncertainty about another's present reliability.

A simple illustration makes this structure vivid. Two hikers glimpse an animal on a ridge. One confidently asserts, "That's a wolf." The other is unsure and withholds belief. Even though the stakes are ordinary and verification is not immediate, the second hiker avoids a needless epistemic risk: uptake might saddle her with a false belief, whereas hesitation preserves her epistemic position until further cues arise.

Applied to the Heron Case, Du's withholding exemplifies this norm of avoiding epistemic rashness across the low-risk variant. Uptake would expose him to the epistemic risk, made salient by Hua's recent misidentifications, of forming a false belief, while withholding merely delays judgment without harming his broader inquiry. His response is therefore a rational, cautionary adjustment rather than a manifestation of distrust or irrational doubt.

3.2 Structural Mismatch

The Heron Case reveals a structural asymmetry in the kind of cognitive operations available to the speaker and the hearer. Hua's judgment is formed through direct perceptual uptake: she sees fine-grained features: posture, leg length, plumage, water depth, that her long familiarity with the wetland allows her to integrate immediately and unreflectively. Her justification is object-directed and experiential: she knows *by seeing*.

Du, however, does not occupy the same perceptual position. His visual impression supports only a coarse classification: a tall grey wader of some sort. To settle whether it is a heron, he would need to rely not on his own perception but on Hua's perceptual discrimination. This requires a qualitatively different kind of cognitive operation: an abstract, reflective assessment of another agent's reliability, rather than direct engagement with the object. Du must evaluate a person, not the bird.

The mismatch is therefore between two different epistemic roles and operations: S forms a belief by directly registering the world; H must form a belief, if at all, by abstracting over the agent who registered the world. This already makes alignment fragile. As work on perceptual entitlement emphasizes (Burge 1993), first-person experiential grounding provides immediate justification, whereas agent-directed, metacognitive grounding is mediated and requires additional conditions to be met. Moreover, against this background, Du may reasonably interpret Hua's confidence as stemming from her vantage point rather than from stable task-specific reliability, especially given his higher-order evidence about her recent misidentifications.

In such circumstances, the two epistemic routes naturally diverge: S's rationality supports belief; H's rationality supports withholding. Knowledge transmission fails not because either party errs but because the route through which S knows is not a route through which H can know.

Possession-knowledge (K-possess) therefore does not guarantee communicable knowledge (K-comm).

3.3 Epistemic Self-Responsibility

A third element in Du's rational withholding concerns a basic constraint on epistemic agency: a hearer must form beliefs in a way that is answerable to his own total evidential situation, rather than letting another person's judgment replace it. On accounts of doxastic responsibility ([Hieronymi 2008](#)), one must engage the evidence one possesses when forming or withholding belief.

In the Heron Case, Du's perceptual access is limited: he can tell that there is a tall grey wader in the water, but on that basis he cannot determine which species it is. This does not justify belief that the bird is a heron, nor does it provide any direct defeater for Hua's belief. What it does is fix Du's epistemic perspective, it marks the starting point from which any further belief on his part would have to be responsibly formed.

Whether because his perceptual basis is insufficient for belief or because epistemic agency itself requires responsible treatment of one's total evidence, Du must give weight to the further, non-perceptual evidence he possesses, namely, that Hua has recently made errors in precisely this task-type and environment. Since this performance record is part of his evidential situation, epistemic self-responsibility requires him to incorporate it into his assessment rather than allow Hua's present judgment to stand in for his own. Given his evidence that her current reliability is unsettled, such substitution would not be responsible.

Du's withholding is therefore the attitude that most responsibly reflects his evidential situation. It is not an arbitrary or adversarial doubt, but a response shaped by the defeaters he

possesses; relying on his own evidential position here is not a form of epistemic arrogance, but simply the way a responsible agent must reason.

4. Objections and replies

Objection 1: It's just lucky

A natural worry is that Hua's belief that the bird is a heron is merely luckily true. Given her recent string of misidentifications in similar circumstances, the objector claims, her present success looks accidental: this time she happens, by good fortune, to say "heron" when the animal really is a heron, but in nearby situations she would just as easily have gone wrong. On this diagnosis, the Heron Case fails to be a genuine case of knowledge without uptake; it is simply a case of a luckily true belief that does not deserve to be called knowledge.

Reply

First, from Du's point of view it is perfectly reasonable for Hua's success, if it is a success, to look lucky. His total evidence includes her recent misidentifications in very similar tasks, so he is rational in treating uptake as risky and in suspending belief. This vindicates his withholding, but it is only a claim about what is rational *given his evidence*. It does not yet follow that, as things stand, Hua's belief is in fact epistemically lucky in a way that undermines knowledge.

Second, on standard anti-luck or safety accounts of knowledge ([Pritchard 2005](#)), occasional recent errors do not automatically make a current true belief unsafe. Safety requires that the belief not *easily* have been false in relevantly similar situations; it does not require a perfect recent record. A normally reliable recognitional ability may undergo a short run of mixed performance yet still be sufficiently safe on this occasion. Du's higher-order evidence blocks *his* uptake, but it does not

force the conclusion that Hua's present true belief is "just lucky" in the sense that destroys possession-knowledge.

Objection 2: The hearer is biased

A second objection holds that Du's withholding is not a case of rational caution at all, but a form of testimonial injustice in Fricker's sense ([Fricker 2007](#)). On this view, what really explains Du's refusal to uptake is not performance-based evidence but a prejudicial credibility deficit: he downgrades Hua's word because of her social identity (as a woman) and then retrofits a "track record" narrative as a rationalization. If so, the Heron Case would not display a purely rational failure of uptake but an instance of injustice.

Reply

This objection misidentifies the structure of the Heron Case. On Fricker's account, testimonial injustice requires two conditions:

- (1) a credibility deficit grounded in a social identity marker, and
- (2) a deficit sustained by prejudice rather than evidence.

Neither condition is met here. Du's assessment rests solely on recent task-specific performance, and the same evidential standard would apply to any speaker with that record. No identity-based asymmetry is operative.

Of course, there are real-world cases in which a hearer refuses uptake because of a speaker's social identity, for example, discounting a woman's testimony, and such cases would indeed count as testimonial injustice. But their existence does not threaten the present argument. They illustrate a *different and morally worse* category of transmission failure, one driven by prejudice rather than evidence. Mixed cases also occur, where a hearer harbors identity-based

prejudice and retrospectively rationalizes it by appealing to a superficially fitting “track record.” These are socially important but are not the phenomenon analyzed here. The Heron Case isolates a *purely epistemic* failure of transmission, where withholding is fully grounded in the hearer’s evidence and no identity-based prejudice plays any role.

Conclusion

The Heron Case shows a kind of testimonial failure that does not come from ignorance or irrationality, but from a structural barrier to transmission. Hua’s belief that the bird is a heron is well supported: it comes from her reliable perceptual skill, matches what she currently sees, and can be explained in publicly accessible terms. On standard views, this is enough for knowledge. She has possession-knowledge (K-possess).

But the case makes clear that K-possess does not automatically create a transmission route for the hearer. Du does not share Hua’s perceptual access and must rely on judging her as an informant. Because he has higher-order evidence about her recent mistakes, and because he is responsible for responding to all his evidence, a particular rational attitude for him is to withhold. For Du, accepting the testimony would be an epistemic risk, not a route to knowledge. So, a rational hearer may fail to gain knowledge even when a knowledgeable speaker testifies in a non-deceptive situation.

This puts pressure on traditional theories that tend to assume that the conditions for a speaker’s knowing are also the conditions for that knowledge to be communicable to a hearer. Without distinguishing between possessed knowledge (K-possess) and communicable knowledge (K-comm), such theories risk either downgrading competent speakers or treating careful, higher-

order-sensitive hearers as irrational. The two-status framework avoids this problem by recognizing that the speaker's and hearer's justificatory routes can rightly diverge.

References

- Burge, T. (1993). Content preservation. *The Philosophical Review*, 102(4), 457-488.
- Christensen, D. (2010). Higher-order Evidence. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 81(1), 185-215.
- Elga, A. (2007). Reflection and disagreement. *Noûs*, 41(3), 478-502.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, A. I. (1967). A causal theory of knowing. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 64(12), 357-372.
- Goldman, A. I. (1979). What is justified belief? In *Justification and knowledge: New studies in epistemology* (pp. 1-23). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Hieronymi, P. (2008). Responsibility for believing. *Synthese*, 161(3), 357-373.
- Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from words: Testimony as a source of knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, D. (2005). *Epistemic luck*. Clarendon Press.