Social Epistemology,
Vol. 18, No. 1, January–March 2004, pp. 51–58

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Can Epistemology Help? The problem of the Kentucky-fried rats

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Can epistemology be of any use to non-philosophers? Ethicists can, besides developing general theories of morality, shed light on problems like abortion and euthanasia, and so offer helpful insights for public-policy debates. They can give helpful analyses of different kinds of moral reasoning, and can offer advice on what weights to give different kinds of consideration. Can epistemology help in the same way? Not by doing what they have been doing for most of the twentieth century. That is, they can't help by developing general epistemological theories, or analysing notions like knowledge or justification. The kinds of principles that are developed in this tradition are of no use in helping people in their ordinary epistemic practices. There has been, in the history of philosophy, a kind of epistemology aimed at helping people live epistemically responsible lives (e.g., Descartes 1985 [1628], Spinoza 1958 [1677], and, more recently, Alvin Goldman 1999), but most recent work has not been in this tradition, and, as a result, is not much use to the non-philosopher. To illustrate the problem, consider the case of the urban legend, a feature of modern life that raises a practical epistemic problem: when should I believe a story I have been told? The problem is twofold. First, we have to trust one another. Second, we shouldn't simply trust everybody all the time.

I The Necessity of Trust

One of the things that went wrong with Descartes's project of founding all knowledge on the clearly and distinctly perceived is that it is hard to get from there to any substantial knowledge about the world. A great many foundationalists have tried the same project in other ways, but with no more success (cf. Quine 1980 [1953]). The problem

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ISSN 0269–1728 (print)/ISSN 1464–5297 (online)
DOI: 10.1080/0269172042000249372

is generally agreed to be this: If the foundational beliefs are restricted to the class of beliefs that enjoy some relatively strong epistemic immunity (incorrigibility, infallibility, self-evidence, or the like), the foundation is apt to be too skimpy to support a rich belief system. One response foundationalists have had to this problem is to loosen the requirements for being a foundational belief. For these moderate foundationalists, a foundational belief needs no more than to have some degree of warrant not derived from other beliefs. They can be defeasible, fallible, corrigible, and so on, as long as they have some positive epistemic status not derived from other beliefs. In this way, Hume and other empiricists make room for knowledge of the external world based on sense perception. It is possible to get a very rich picture of the world, now, because we have allowed information outside our own heads into the foundations of knowledge. The price is fallibilism, but we willingly pay it.

But it's not so simple. As Hume shows, the weakening of the foundations doesn't do all the work we need it to. As long as we confine our foundational beliefs to those we acquire with our own cognitive resources, we still can't get very far in building a picture of the world. Suppose, like Hume, we confine our foundations to what we currently perceive and what we currently remember perceiving. There is no way ground inductive reasoning, and so we can't come to know anything about distant regions of the world or times gone by. Suppose we are more generous than Hume is; we will allow into the foundations of our knowledge what we have current access to, by intuition, sense perception, and memory, but also what we can establish inductively on the basis of that information. We still can't get very far. No one person's life experience provides enough of an evidential base to support the rich picture of the world we all take for granted. Try drawing a map of the world or writing a history of the world based only on what you have access to and what you can establish inductively from that, and you'll see how impoverished such an evidential base is. The only way to get past a very parochial belief-system is to allow other people's claims to have some validity; we have to trust other people (cf. Webb 1993).

II The Problem Posed by Urban Legends

Obviously, believing everything you are told is equally crazy. Just as it is an intellectual vice to be overly sceptical, it is also an intellectual vice to gullible. The person of intellectual virtue believes the right people, at the right times, to the right degree. But how can we cash out all those 'rights'? One approach to the problem is to take testimony not as providing justified belief, but rather as providing prima facie justified belief. If no defeating conditions obtain, then the belief in question is justified simpliciter. This leaves us with a project: under what conditions is the prima facie justified status of testimonial belief defeated? Some defeating conditions are easy to spell out. If a particular person is known to be a habitual liar, or persistently unreliable for other reasons, then that person's testimony is not adequate grounds for belief. Beliefs based on that person's testimony are not justified. Likewise, if it is extremely unlikely that the testifier's claim is true (he or she is claiming something to be true that is intrinsically

unlikely) then its prima facie justification is undermined. So the appropriate principle for an epistemic agent to follow is not 'Believe what you are told,' but rather 'Believe what you are told unless …' where what follows is a list of defeating conditions. We will have a complete epistemology of testimony when we can compile a complete list of defeaters.

There is a set of special cases that raise a problem for this approach: urban legends. An urban legend is a story, told as really having happened, which appears mysteriously and spreads spontaneously, which usually contains elements of humour or horror, or both. They are usually told as having happened to a friend of a friend, rarely as having happened to the informant him- or herself. They are mostly false, though they are sometimes based on an element of truth (See Brunvand 1981, 1984, 1986, 1989, 1993). For the sake of an example, here is the urban legend known as the story of the Kentucky-Fried Rat, as reported by folklorist George Carey:

> Two couples stopped one night at a notable carry-out for a fried chicken snack. The husband returned to the car with the chicken. While sitting there in the car eating their chicken, the wife said, 'My chicken tastes funny.' She continued to eat and continued to complain.
>
> After a while the husband said, 'Let me see it.' The driver of the car decided to cut the light on and then it was discovered that the woman was eating a rodent, nicely floured and fried crisp. The woman went into shock and was rushed to the hospital. It was reported that the husband was approached by lawyers representing the carry-out and was offered the sum of $35,000. The woman remained on the critical list for several days. Spokesmen from the hospital would not divulge the facts about the case and nurses were instructed to keep their mouths shut. And it is also reported that a second offer was made for $75,000, and this too was refused. The woman died and presumably the case will come to court (Brunvand 1981).

Variations of this story have been told and retold all over the country, as having happened to different people in different places.

III Some Defeaters that Don't Work

Several facts tip off the folklorist that this story is an urban legend. For one thing, it is very precise about irrelevant details, but vague about details that are central to the story. There are precise dollar amounts for the two settlement offers, but other details are missing. The woman to whom this happened is not named. No one who tells this story can cite any of the particulars, though many will point out the local restaurant in which the event is alleged to have occurred. Some of the details of the story are suspiciously unlikely. Wouldn't even alienated fast-food workers notice the difference between a rat and a chicken part? Wouldn't the average consumer, even in a darkened car, notice that there was something unusual about this particular piece of fried food (say, that there was fur in it, or that the bones were too many and too small to be chicken bones)? Is someone likely to go into shock, remain on the critical list for several days, and eventually die from eating a bit of rat? The main tip-off is that this

story is told and retold in a thousand different small towns across America, each one reported as gospel truth.

Well, you might respond, if the folklorist can spot these stories, why can't we formulate some defeaters that will help us in not accepting these stories as true? Let's try that strategy, and see where it gets us. If we succeed, we will have formulated a true principle, following which would lead an agent to accept testimony in all and only those cases in which he or she ought to. Here are some proposed defeaters:

(A) Never trust a Friend of a Friend. The phrase 'friend of a friend' is so common in discussion of urban legends (since they are almost always reported at second hand) that it has become a technical term: FOAF. A common feature of many of these stories is that they are reported by people who were not eyewitnesses; that is, they always happened to a friend of a friend, never firsthand to the person reporting them. Perhaps we could make it a rule to trust only those who are eyewitnesses to what they are reporting. But clearly this principle is too strong. The scepticism imposed on us if we were to follow this principle is hardly less extreme than if we trusted no one at all. Most of science would be inaccessible to us, as well as all of history and geography. The very facts that make us epistemically dependent on others make us epistemically dependent on total strangers, like newscasters and textbook authors.

(B) Never trust in the absence of central details. Very well, we have to trust not only our friends, but also friends of our friends. Perhaps the problem with urban legends is not that they are reported at second and third hand, but that they are reported in such a way as makes them vague on details. So perhaps our rule should be never to trust when the story lacks details that link it to a particular time and place. But again, such a rule would be entirely too strict, and would wreak havoc with our belief systems. First of all, it would only allow us to believe narratives; anything reported to us (like scientific laws and general truths) that was not in the form of a story of an event that happened in a particular time and place would not be trustworthy. But even if we were to restrict this defeater to those cases when a story was being told, so that we are allowed to accept expert testimony of non-narrative kinds, the rule is too strict. After all, if my mother tells me she once saw a man balance a sword on his nose, I am entitled to believe her even if she can't remember just when or where it was, or what the man's name was. Even if she reports to me that her sister once saw such a man, I am entitled to believe it.

(C) Never trust when the story is 'too good a story'. Another common feature of urban legends is that they make good story-telling. They wrap up neatly, with a moral either humorously or horribly underlined. Perhaps all we need to say is that we should be sceptical when the story is too neat. This proposed defeater seems promising. After all, we do have an idea when a story is too good to be true, and we are frequently (and rightly) sceptical of such stories. But again, this defeater requires us to give up too much. Whereas we may be justified in being more suspicious when the story wraps up

too neatly, that is frequently evidence that some of the details of the story have been adjusted in the interests of drama, not that the main outlines of the story are false. Consequently, it is probably closer to right to say that in such cases we should lower our confidence in the testimony, but not lose confidence altogether. Sometimes the truth makes a great story.

(D) Various conjunctions, disjunctions, and other weakenings. You might reasonably complain that I have been suggesting only implausibly simple defeaters, and that the truth is likely to be more complicated. Granted. But constructions based on these proposed defeaters are not going to do any better. Since each of the defeaters is too strong, we can rule out disjunctions of them as too strong as well. Conjunctions of them (for example, don't trust a FOAF who can't produce details when the story is too good to be true) are also still too strong, though weaker than the original proposals. It is a reasonably easy matter to produce counterexamples to any such construction; just think of a case in which a friend reports a perfectly ordinary event, and the story happens accidentally to have the features of an urban legend mentioned in your proposed defeater. I propose that it will be easy to come up with such a case in which it is clearly epistemically in the clear to believe such a story.

'But surely,' the traditional epistemologist replies, 'there must be some true principle that will sort out the wheat from the chaff. After all, there must be a fact of the matter as to what stories should be believed what stories shouldn't, and there must be some way to codify the distinction'. This complaint is surely right. At the very least, we could point out that there exists a set of ordered pairs of stories and occasions of telling such that the story should be believed on that occasion, and we could make it a principle to believe all and only those stories. But even if we could come up with a complicated defeater that would sort out the cases in the right way, it would still be entirely too complex a principle to be grasped and followed by any human agent, so it's no help.

(E) Never trust a UL. As I noted before, folklorists can spot urban legends, and they know not to believe them. The stories have features that identify them as legend rather than fact. Why can't we just incorporate those features into a defeater? One of the cases in which we should withhold our trust is when what is being reported to us is an urban legend. What could be simpler? But how is this simple suggestion to be carried out? Recall the defining characteristics of an urban legend: An urban legend is a story, told as really having happened, which appears mysteriously and spreads spontaneously, which usually contains elements of humour or horror, or both. They are usually told as having happened to a friend of a friend, rarely as having happened to the informant him- or herself. Some of these features are internal features of the story, but one of the most important defining features of an urban legend is that it arises mysteriously and spreads spontaneously in various forms. If the correct epistemic principle were 'Believe what you are told unless …' and one of the defeaters following the unless were '… what you are told is an urban legend', in order to apply the principle, we would have to do an investigation of the history of

every story we were told that had the marks of an urban legend. The problem ramifies for other kinds of testimony. Do I have to become an expert in all manner of areas of study in order to be a responsible epistemic agent?

IV The Problem that Remains, and What it Shows

So we have a dilemma. If we formulate our epistemic principles, complete with defeaters, in terms only of what is internal to the things reported to us, we will get the wrong results; that is, the principle will tell us either to trust when we shouldn't, or be sceptical when we shouldn't. If we formulate our epistemic principles, complete with defeaters, in terms of other properties of the testimony, then we require of the epistemic agent not merely a yes or no decision about whether to accept the particular piece of testimony, but an unrealistic burden of investigation before the decision can be made. Everybody, to be epistemically virtuous, has to become a folklorist. Since we can't all be required by our epistemic obligations to become folklorists, there must have been something wrong with our original assumptions.

One suggestion for where we went wrong is that we took an internalist turn at the beginning. If we do not insist that the epistemic principles which describe when belief is justified be the kind of principles that are capable of being explicitly understood and followed, then it might well be that one of the principles we rejected is the right one. Just as there are grammatical rules that we don't grasp, although we follow them when we are speaking grammatically, there may well be epistemic rules that we don't consciously grasp, and perhaps couldn't follow if we did grasp them.

This suggestion makes sense if we think of epistemology as cataloguing rules that describe good epistemic behaviour, even if they have nothing to do with guiding behaviour. That is one task for epistemology to undertake, but not the only one. One of the traditional tasks of epistemology is to give guidance to epistemic agents, to help them better pursue the goals of achieving true belief and avoiding false belief. If that is our goal (or one of our goals) as epistemologists, then we are not free to take the externalist's escape route. After all, the question we are asking here is whether epistemology can be any help. It is not help to the believer-in-the-street to tell her she doesn't need reasons, as long as her belief-forming dispositions are reliable. The problem posed by the Kentucky-Fried Rat must be solved another way.

Here is another possible solution, which I conjecture is the most promising one for doing epistemology. The problem in the first place was not that we expected epistemic principles to do a kind of work they couldn't do, but that we were trying to solve the problems in terms of principles in the first place. Look again at the analogy with the rules of grammar. If you want to understand how a language works as a formal system, you need to understand the rules of grammar. If you want to understand how language is learned, and how to help people master a language, the rules of grammar are not a particularly good way to go. As a recent cognitive science text puts it:

> Although linguistic knowledge is representable in the form of rule systems, the grammars that linguists write about are *hypotheses* about *unconscious* rules. … Therefore it is presumptuous to assume that parents can fully articulate to their children linguistic

> rule systems that, in part, resist our best efforts at scientific inquiry. Furthermore, parents do not generally have access to the relevant rules of their language … Although we may, from time to time, reflect on our language use, we simply do not have reliable access to the systematic body of knowledge that underlies our linguistic ability. (Stillings 1995 [Emphasis in original])

In other words, before principles comes practice; before understanding comes training. Linguistic training consists of the production of correct sentences in the presence of the learner, and correction of incorrect utterances produced by the learner, but only rarely and late do general rules make an appearance. The situation with epistemic training is different, of course. When we train people to be good epistemic agents, we do that partly by correcting incorrect judgements, but we also offer them principles. However, we usually recognise that those principles are strictly false. They take the form of universal generalisations to which we know there are exceptions. When we tell out children that the doctor can be trusted and that the TV commercial can't, we are giving them guidance by using overgeneralised rules. Obviously there are cases when the doctor shouldn't be trusted, and the TV commercial should. If we try to doctor the principles so that they have the right extension, we are reduced to bafflement pretty quickly. Try to say precisely when I should trust my doctor and precisely when I should not, and you'll see what I mean. Instead, what we try to do is train children to exercise a general kind of judgement, just as we do with moral judgement. When ethicists write about abortion, or euthanasia, or animal welfare, they make arguments for policy recommendations, but they don't start with the principle of utility or the categorical imperative; instead, they point out salient features of the situation that should affect one's judgement. Principles come later, as an aid to judgement, but they are not the final story. If epistemologists want to be of any help, they should do the same thing. Exactly how that is to be done, I leave for another day.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this essay was accepted for presentation at the 1998 Value Inquiry Conference at Montevallo University. It was also delivered as a talk at Philosophy Symposium at the University of Central Oklahoma, September 2000, where Dr. Theresa Vaughan made suggestions that improved the essay. I am also grateful to Alvin Goldman for many helpful suggestions. Some of the research for this essay was conducted at the University of Arizona at the NEH summer institute on the Philosophical Foundations of Social Epistemology.

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