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Axel Gelfert ^a

^a Department of History and Philosophy of Science,
University of Cambridge,

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ARTICLE

KANT ON TESTIMONY¹

Axel Gelfert

Immanuel Kant is often regarded as an exponent of the ‘individualist’ tradition in epistemology, according to which testimony is not a fundamental source of knowledge. The present paper argues that this view is far from accurate. Kant devotes ample space to discussions of testimony and, in his lectures on logic, arrives at a distinct and stable philosophical position regarding testimony. Important elements of this position consist in (a) acknowledging the ineliminability of testimony; (b) realizing that testimony can establish empirical knowledge with certainty; (c) establishing a presumptive principle regarding the acceptance of testimony; (d) arguing for a symmetry between knowledge based on experience and knowledge based on testimony. Rejecting testimony as a fundamental source of knowledge merely on the basis that no theoretically necessary ground for its truth can be given, would, as Kant puts it, indicate ‘a lack of moral interest’. Such ‘incredulity’ would be a form of ‘logical egoism’: it demonstrates an unwillingness or inability to think oneself in the place of others, yet this we must do if we are to trust our own judgements. While Kant strongly endorses testimony as a source of empirical knowledge, he does, however, make one important restriction: ‘Propositions of reason’ (*Vernunftwahrheiten*), such as universal moral principles, may not be adopted on the basis of testimony. I argue that this distinction, between testimonial knowledge of empirical matters of fact and individual knowledge of propositions of reason, is an important element of Kant’s epistemology of testimony, as it explains how his strong endorsement of testimony as a source of knowledge can be squared with his equally strong demand for intellectual autonomy. Finally, I comment on the overall implications of this account for Kant’s discussion, elsewhere in his work, of the public nature of communication.

¹In 2005 this paper was awarded the British Society for the History of Philosophy Prize for a submitted essay by a post-graduate student. Axel Gelfert is the first recipient of the prize. He has since been appointed to research fellowships at Collegium Budapest (Institute for Advanced Study) and the National University of Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant may seem an unlikely candidate to recruit for the cause of social epistemology, and for the epistemology of testimony in particular. It seems fair to say that, second perhaps only to Descartes, Kant has come to be seen as the prototypical example of a philosopher in the 'individualist' tradition – that is, a tradition according to which 'testimony has little or no epistemic importance'.² Thus, Anthony Coady, in his seminal and influential monograph *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (1992), makes no substantive reference to Kant, and even those contemporary philosophers with a more explicit agenda of social epistemology frequently cast Kant in the exemplary role of individualist philosopher as far as testimony is concerned.³ Frederick Schmitt, for example, writes that 'the way sociality enters' into Kant's philosophy is such that 'there is no reliance on testimony' (Schmitt 1987: 47).

In the present paper, I argue that such views do not adequately reflect Kant's position regarding testimony. What is overlooked is that Kant does, in fact, have a well-developed epistemology of testimony, which features most prominently in his lectures on logic and which gains further support from remarks he makes about testimony in his other writings. Beyond acknowledging the ineliminability of testimony and the fact that testimony *can*, and frequently *does*, produce knowledge, Kant argues for a continuity between testimony and experience. Regarding its epistemic characteristics, testimonial knowledge is, Kant argues, 'neither in degree nor in kind in any way to be distinguished' from knowledge based on one's own experience.⁴ This symmetry thesis, together with the additional argument that 'incredulity' regarding testimony shows 'lack of moral interest',⁵ establishes a presumptive principle regarding the acceptance of testimony: Testimony is to be believed, unless we know that certain defeating conditions obtain. The mere possibility of failure of testimony, whether due to lying or mere error, does not suffice to undermine the presumption. One important restriction does, however, apply: 'Propositions of reason' (*Vernunftwahrheiten*), such as moral truths, though communicable *formaliter*, may not be adopted on the basis of testimony. As I shall argue in the final section, this points to a way of squaring Kant's sympathy towards testimony with the strong demand for autonomy expressed in the maxim 'to think for oneself'. First, however, it seems appropriate to say a little more about where in Kant's work his epistemology of testimony is located.

²See Coady 1992: 13, who also speaks of 'the dominance of an individualist ideology' in the 'post-Renaissance Western world'.

³One notable exception is Scholz (2001), who uses examples from Kant to illustrate positions in the contemporary debate.

⁴AA, XVI, 501.

⁵AA, XVI, 509.

LOCATING KANT'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

Unlike, for example, Hume, whose influential text 'On Miracles'⁶ is the standard historical starting point for many contemporary papers in the epistemology of testimony, Kant never published a fully developed, self-contained text on the subject.

His position must therefore be inferred from a variety of passages and comments scattered throughout his work. By far the most detailed and explicit treatment of testimony in Kant's work is to be found in his lectures on logic. These lectures, over a period of forty years (1755–95), formed part of the core of Kant's teaching duties at Königsberg.⁷ Throughout, the lectures were based on Georg Friedrich Meier's *Vernunftlehre* (1752), and in particular on a shorter extract, the *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, which was published the same year. From the testimony of his students,⁸ it is known that Kant lectured directly from his heavily annotated copy of the *Auszug*. Kant's notes, together with the text of Meier's *Auszug*, have been made available as Volume XVI of the Academy edition, and these *Reflexionen* will function as an important source of information in the following pages. Fortunately, there are also a number of lecture notes by Kant's students, of which several sets have been edited and analysed in the last few decades and which span a period of several decades.⁹ Finally, there is the work of Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche, whom Kant commissioned to write up his logic as a 'manual for lectures'. Though published in 1800, before Kant's death, and listed, in the Academy edition, among Kant's own works, the accuracy of the Jäsche Logic is hotly contested.¹⁰ Given that more direct accounts of Kant's logic lectures have recently become available,¹¹ it will therefore not be relied upon in the present paper.

Despite the heavy reliance on Meier's logic, Kant's aim was never purely didactical nor exegetical. On the contrary: in an announcement for the winter semester 1765/6, Kant explains he has chosen Meier's text because its diversity 'gives occasion, during the critique of reason, to also look at the critique of taste' and to reflect on 'the practical and healthy

⁶Section X of his *Enquiry*.

⁷See Hinske, 1992: 20–2.

⁸Thus Count Gottfried Wenzel von Purgstall in a letter dated 18 April 1795: 'Kant reads from an old logic by Meyer... Of his audience no-one else has a copy' (translated from the quote in Hinske, 1992: 34).

⁹For a discussion of Kant's logic lectures of c.1780 and a survey of previous studies, see Pinder, 1987.

¹⁰See the discussion in Conrad 1994: 62–5.

¹¹In particular, the *Bauch Logic* (which has been related to Kant's lectures of c.1772–5; henceforth *BL*), the *Hechsel Logic* (c.1780–2), and the *Warsaw Logic* (= *WL*, c.1780) have only recently (1998) been edited by Tillmann Pinder.

understanding'.¹² Elsewhere, Kant confirms that in his lectures, he 'aimed at not merely commenting on the author... but at assessing, weighing and expanding [his argument], and at bringing it together under principles that to me seemed better'.¹³ Also, Kant did not shy away from modifying the material he presented or correcting the author where he saw it fit. For example, when Meier writes that 'faith [*fides historica*] is the approval [*Beifall*] which we give a thing on the basis of [someone's] testimony', Kant sees this as a flaw and, according to the *Vienna Logic*, argues:

Our author [=Meier] relates belief [=fides] merely to testimony.¹⁴ We distinguish, however, between *believing something* and *believing someone*. We can *believe something* without someone's having said it to us. We can believe someone if we have accepted something on his testimony. Proofs from experience may well show that the thing is, but not the absolute necessity of the thing. For experience gives only something contingent.¹⁵

In recent years, a much clearer picture of the development of Kant's thought has emerged and it is now widely acknowledged that there is no clear demarcation between Kant 'the teacher' and Kant 'the writer-philosopher', and that any account of Kant's philosophical development will profit from a fine-grained analysis that goes beyond the traditional differentiation between a critical and pre-critical phase.¹⁶ This is true, in particular, of Kant's lectures on logic which, it has been argued, anticipate a number of moves and strategies that later feature prominently in the Critiques.¹⁷ As Giorgio Tonelli argues, quite generally, 'logic was never dissociated from the methodological consideration of the *substance* of thought, i.e. from subjects which we assign today to the 'Theory of Knowledge' (Tonelli 1975: 187). It is the aim of the present paper to argue that the same could be said, more specifically, about the epistemology of testimony. By drawing on the body of Kant's logical work, as well as his *Reflexionen* and other writings, I hope to show that testimony, too, has a substantive place in his philosophy and cannot be divorced from his thinking about knowledge, autonomy and communication.

¹²Translated from the quote in Pinder 1992: 114, fn. 104.

¹³AA, XIII, 538f. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. References in the present format, marked AA, refer to the Academy edition of Kant's works (*Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: 1900ff.) and state the number of the corresponding volume/sub-volume, followed by page numbers.

¹⁴In fact, this is due to an oversimplification in the abbreviated *Auszug*. In the *Vernunftlehre* (§236), Meier acknowledges that our approval is only 'predominantly' (*vornehmlich*, §236), not *exclusively* based on testimony.

¹⁵AA, XXIV.2, 893.

¹⁶For the former, see Hinske 1998: 8n.9; 79f.; for the latter, see Hinske 1998: 27–31, 92–117.

¹⁷On this point, see especially Conrad, 1994: 11–16, and Tonelli, 1994.

TAKING TESTIMONY SERIOUSLY

The fundamental worry about testimony, of which Kant, as the quote in the previous section suggests, was well aware, concerns the fact that the relation between testimony and truth is at best contingent. The mere act of testifying bears no necessary relation to the truth of the matter in question. On Kant's account this is true *a fortiori*, since experience quite generally 'gives only something contingent'; hence, the same must be true of testimony, which, after all, purports to communicate knowledge based on others' experiences. Beyond the general fallibility of all empirical knowledge, however, there are special problems regarding testimony as a source of knowledge, mainly owing to the fact that testimony crucially involves other epistemic agents. This leads to two distinct possibilities of how testimony can fail systematically to generate knowledge: namely, when the speaker is *incompetent or insincere*. It will therefore be of interest to see what Kant has to say about competence and sincerity as prerequisites for a good witness.

Kant raises the topic of competence only in very general terms and mainly follows Meier's discussion of '*Tüchtigkeit*' (*dexteritas*), who defined a competent witness as someone who possesses 'sufficient powers to not only acquire the right experience but also to designate it in the right way' (*Auszug*, §207).¹⁸ In particular, there is no further attempt to define competence in terms of reliability, for example along probabilistic lines. Kant is notoriously sceptical about the prospects of a logic of probability (see Cataldi Madonna 1992: 35); where we cannot have certainty – as in cases of testimony where the competence of the witness may be in doubt – we can only judge on a case by case basis. Those scholars in the Leibniz–Wolff tradition, who extrapolate from the mathematics of probability to a *logica probabilium*, hoping that the latter can solve epistemological puzzles, in Kant's opinion are misguided.¹⁹ In his *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Kant says as much when he writes about sagacity ('a natural talent to judge tentatively, as to where the truth may well be found'): 'The logic of the schools teaches us nothing about this'.²⁰ Competence eludes formal definition because it is essentially a skill that varies with context: 'It is not in all cases so easy to acquire experiences, and it takes practice'.²¹ Interestingly, competence on this account is not conceived of as entirely within the witness but also takes into account the

¹⁸The German word *Tüchtigkeit* is typically used to refer to outstanding practical ability and prowess, but, in legal contexts especially, it can also denote general competence to perform a given task.

¹⁹See also Cataldi Madonna, 1992: 38 for a discussion of how Kant's scepticism about a *logic* of probability (as opposed to its mere mathematics) grew even stronger towards, and during, his critical phase.

²⁰*AA*, VII, 223.

²¹*AA*, XXIV.2, *Vienna Logic*, 898.

circumstances under which experiences are made. In order for someone to be a competent witness, what is required is not only *ability* but also *opportunity*.²²

In addition to observational skills and favourable circumstances, a third element is required for a competent witness, namely 'the adroitness to declare his experiences so that one can well understand what he means'. This, Kant recognizes, 'is not so easy'. Some people report their experiences with a high degree of accuracy (*pünktlich*), others are able to sketch 'but a light silhouette of their experience, and are unable to give an account of all the circumstances'.²³ A general inability to express oneself clearly and accurately, in this context, is far more detrimental than an occasional lapse (such as a wrong empirical judgement, or the use of a wrong term), as it introduces a systematic error. As Kant already noted, in a somewhat aphoristic manner, in his *Reflexionen*: 'Error in principles is greater than in their application . . . violation of grammar worse than vocabularies (worst in logic)'.²⁴ In the light of Kant's emphasis, throughout his philosophy, on the importance of (law-like) rules that should structure, and govern, thought and action, it seems plausible to argue that these examples indicate that, in the case of competence, too, it is *systematic* failures – due to a lack of rule-guidedness – rather than accidental failures that are of philosophical significance. Whereas *accidental* failures merely indicate the fallibility of experience in general, systematic failures pose a more general threat to knowledge acquisition. Mental illness, for example, casts doubt on the competence of a person (*AA*, VII, 202–20), but not so much because it necessarily generates false beliefs as because it shows a lack of rule-guidedness on the part of the speaker. Thus, competence, when analysed in terms of *Tüchtigkeit*, is not a statistical point about someone's being right more often than wrong, but requires the presence of an adequate 'rule-guidedness' of reasoning and observation. As mentioned earlier, according to Kant, spelling out what these rules are does not fall within the remit of logic. However, this does not preclude the possibility of further characterization by other means, and one such attempt will be discussed in a later section.

Kant, as is evident from this discussion, does not attempt to justify testimony by accumulating empirical evidence of its reliability. In this, as well as in his rejection of probabilistic concepts in assessing testimony, he differs from other philosophers, such as David Hume, who also acknowledged the metaphysically tenuous link between testimony and reality. It is therefore to be expected that Kant's defence of testimony as a source of knowledge, too, will take a rather different form. As a first and important

²²Ibid.

²³*AA*, XXIV.2, *Vienna Logic*, 898.

²⁴*AA*, XVI, 294; *Reflexion* 2270.

step, Kant proposes what one might call a symmetry thesis. This is best expressed in the *Vienna Logic*:

[W]e can just as well accept something on the testimony of others as on our own experience. For there is just as much that is deceptive in our experience as in the testimony of others. *Our thinking*, when we hold an experience to be true, is subject to many hazards. To be sure, the testimony that we accept from others is subject to just as many hazards as our own experience is subject to errors. But we can just as well have certainty through the testimony of others as through our own experience.²⁵

Thus, acknowledging that testimony is subject to risk does not suffice to undermine its status as a source of knowledge. It is *possible* to acquire knowledge from testimony (at least as far as factual matters are concerned), and this calls for a robust analysis in terms of knowledge rather than in terms of some substitute notion, such as conjectural belief: 'Where knowledge is possible, is itself already a matter of knowledge',²⁶ and determining the scope of testimonial knowledge is, as we shall see, a challenge Kant does not shy away from.

AN OBLIGATION TO TRUST?

Merely pointing out that testimonial knowledge is *possible*, however, clearly does not yet determine the extent to which we are to place trust in other people's testimony. Thus, in addition to the symmetry thesis, a second (and, as we shall see shortly, distinctly 'Kantian') argument is required. It consists in establishing a presumptive principle regarding the acceptance of testimony. Present-day discussions tend to assimilate the problem of testimonial knowledge to the problem of epistemic justification, thereby emphasizing the recipient's perspective and what one might call his 'presumptive right' to accept testimony as true (provided certain enabling conditions hold, such as the absence of possible defeaters).²⁷ By contrast, Kant's presumptive principle does not so much establish a 'presumptive right' as a 'presumptive obligation' to accept another's testimony. In a telling comment on the very definition of what is testimony and what makes someone a testifier,²⁸ Kant remarks: 'One must never believe mischief in someone else, rather, if one is to act upon it, one must know it [with certainty]. The good, even if one has only a logical ground to opine it, one must believe'.²⁹

²⁵AA, XXIV.2, 896.

²⁶AA, XXIV.2, *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, 733.

²⁷See Fricker, 1995, for a discussion of such 'presumptive right theses'.

²⁸Compare §206 of Meier's *Auszug*.

²⁹AA, XVI, 499. By 'logical ground' Kant, of course, does not mean 'demonstrative proof' but something rather closer to (reasonable) 'logical possibility'.

Not only is it logically possible that testimony should convey knowledge, we also have a presumptive obligation not to distrust others. The mere fact that this is not a *perfect* obligation – that is, universally owed to everyone irrespective of context – does not render it any less fundamental. It does, however, call for a specification of the social and institutional conditions that circumscribe its applicability.³⁰ As we shall see shortly, Kant is well aware of this requirement.

Testimonial belief requires an element of faith (*fides historica*), that is, an exercise of trust. As Kant characterizes it, ‘*Fides* is essentially faithfulness in an agreement [*in pacto*] or towards one another’.³¹ Hence, in accepting someone’s testimony we do not just adopt a new belief, we trust him for the truth. Indeed, in the *Blomberg Logic*, Kant draws an explicit parallel between trust in non-epistemic matters and trusting someone’s testimony:

Fidelity is always required in regard to him who promises something, so that he keeps to what was promised[;] belief, however, is required in regard to him to whom something is promised, namely, so that he accepts as true that the other will keep his promise. The two must be combined with each other . . . It also indicates a very bad mode of thought if one never trusts anyone in anything, but instead one wants to see everything that is promised and pledged to him present and fulfilled.³²

It is this dual structure of a duty to fidelity combined with a duty not to be wantonly suspicious which underlies Kant’s presumptive principle regarding the acceptance of testimony. While Kant’s categorical stance on lying is well known (for example in his essay *On a Supposed Right to Lie From Philanthropy*, where he describes lying as ‘a wrong inflicted upon humanity’),³³ what is frequently overlooked is the fact that he issues an equally strong condemnation against distrust of others, and against incredulity in general.

Kant distinguishes two forms of incredulity, which, however, are continuous with one another. The first explicitly concerns testimony:

*Incredulous*₁ [*ungläubisch*] is someone who accepts nothing on testimony [unless] it is sufficiently confirmed to be knowledge. (In this case, one must make many arbitrary assumptions, so as to be able to make an attempt to reach certainty in knowledge.) Commonly such a person is suspicious and distrustful.³⁴

³⁰On the distinction between perfect and imperfect obligations, see O’Neill 1989: 189–93.

³¹*AA*, XVI, 513.

³²Quoted after the Cambridge edition of the *Lectures on Logic* (henceforth, *LL*), 193f.

³³Kant 1797 (Cambridge edition, 1996), 612.

³⁴*AA*, XVI, 508f.

This attitude, however, is only a special case of a second, more general attitude of incredulity: ‘Incredulous₂ [*ungläubig*] is someone who does not want to accept anything as true except on theoretically conclusive grounds’.³⁵ Whereas incredulity with respect to testimony is morally objectionable because it generates an attitude of suspicion and undermines the practice of promises and social life – ‘[w]ithout fidelity and belief no *republique*, no public affairs, would be able to exist’³⁶ – the second, more general form of incredulity is equally objectionable, not least because it ignores that theoretical certainty is not always required for moral certainty; hence, incredulity indicates a ‘lack [*Mangel*] of moral interest’,³⁷ which in turn amounts to a self-violation of human dignity, for ‘true dignity of man rests on *morality*’.³⁸

Kant’s epistemology of testimony differs markedly from other positions in that it balances the recipient’s perspective, which is characterized by the hearer’s desire to have adequate justification for his testimonial beliefs, with the testifier’s perspective and his legitimate expectation to be believed. Perhaps the most explicit formulation of a presumptive principle is to be found in the *Blomberg Logic*, where Kant writes:³⁹

As for what further concerns the credibility and sincerity of witnesses who communicate experiences they have obtained, everyone is taken to be sincere and upright until the opposite has been proved, namely, that he deviates from the truth etc. According to the well-known principle of fairness [*Billigkeit*]:

Quilibet prosumitur [read: *praesumitur*] *bonus*,

Donec probetur contrarium.⁴⁰

The idea seems to be that, as human beings, we all are in the same epistemic predicament of sometimes giving and sometimes receiving testimony; hence, if we desire to be believed by other people – as we all, at times, do – we ought to also believe the word of others. Of course Kant is not suggesting that we should always believe everyone: gullibility is no cure for the ills of incredulity – ‘both are equally detrimental’.⁴¹ But some degree of trust is necessary if our epistemic position is to be tenable and sustainable. A certain degree of faith (*fides*) in epistemic matters, and in testimony in particular, is ‘practically-necessary’ in order to extend our reach in the practical

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶The translation follows *LL*, 193 (*Blomberg Logic*).

³⁷*AA*, XVI, 509.

³⁸*AA*, XXIV.2, 903. The translation follows *LL*, 347 (*Vienna Logic*).

³⁹*AA*, XXIV.1, 246.

⁴⁰‘Everyone is presumed good until the opposite is proved’.

⁴¹*AA*, XVI, 508.

domain.⁴² To the extent that, as Kant puts it in the *Vienna Logic*, ‘the prestige of our cognition is grounded above all on its practical use’,⁴³ this practical necessity is more than a mere de facto condition of our actual epistemic-cognitive practices, but instead enables us to pursue our practical and epistemic goals.

THE CONTINUITY OF TESTIMONY WITH EXPERIENCE

It is worthwhile reflecting a little more on the kind of ‘practical necessity’ Kant has in mind, as it is easy to misinterpret the phrase as merely an argument from the ineliminability of testimony, which might seem a rather weak endorsement of testimony as a source of knowledge. This, however, would be misunderstanding Kant’s position, which is based on the thesis that historical knowledge (that is, knowledge based on testimony) is the form of knowledge ‘most natural to us’.⁴⁴ Kant partly bases this thesis on the empirical observation that ‘a child already has an inclination to history and such things are easily impressed upon him’,⁴⁵ but it is also supported by his view, more significantly, that testimony is wholly continuous with experience. This continuity is not merely a continuity *in content* – in the sense that some of the things of which we have experiential knowledge, we could have learnt from testimony (and, likewise, that we can tell others about what we have experienced first-hand) – but it is a continuity *in kind*. In one of his later *Reflexionen*, Kant emphasizes this epistemic continuity in kind between testimony and direct experience: ‘Belief on testimony is neither in degree nor in kind in any way to be distinguished from holding-to-be-true on one’s own experience’.⁴⁶

One might expect that the issue of ‘immediacy’ – that is, the direct access we enjoy with respect to our own experiences as opposed to the indirect access with respect to the experiences of others – should be sufficient to establish a difference *in kind* between (direct) experience and testimony. However, to the extent that there is an ‘experiential’ difference, namely that in one case we *perceive* a state of affairs, whereas in the other case we *are told* about it, this difference, for Kant, is irrelevant to the epistemic status of the associated knowledge claim.⁴⁷ If experience is to yield knowledge, it is

⁴²Thus, while the assumption of truthfulness may only be hypothetical, it is nonetheless binding: ‘For there are also practically-necessary hypotheses, which broaden the practical domain’ (*AA*, XVI, 509).

⁴³*AA*, XXIV.2, 902. The translation follows *LL*, 346 (*Vienna Logic*).

⁴⁴*BL*, 72.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*AA*, XVI, 501.

⁴⁷That privileged first-person access is of secondary relevance to the epistemic validity of knowledge claims is a widely accepted view among Kant’s contemporaries and predecessors,

already ‘an operation of the understanding, which is why perception alone does not at all suffice’. Testimony, by contrast, is already of a form that fits seamlessly with our system of beliefs; indeed, as Kant puts it, ‘historical belief *ties together* the experiences of others with my own’.⁴⁸

In this context, Kant draws a distinction between testimony *materialiter*, which he judges acceptable and which is definitive of the institution of testimony, and testimony *formaliter*, which he rejects.⁴⁹ The former concerns knowledge that is testimonial qua subject-matter: ‘When the object is constituted in such a way that it cannot be given to me in any other way than by experience’; examples would be ‘history and geography’. The latter concerns propositions of reason (rather than empirical propositions), which can also be communicated by testimony, but only *formaliter*, ‘namely when it is given to me by someone else and has not originated from my own [faculty of] reason’.⁵⁰ Where it is possible to derive truths solely from one’s own faculty of reason, we have a duty to do so, but where this is impossible we have a duty to rely on other people’s testimony. The idea, again, is that as rational beings we are all on a par with one another: Hence, in matters that are the domain of reason (such as morality and universal truths), each of us can, and indeed has a duty to, think things through on their own, whereas in contingent empirical matters (such as historical and geographical facts) we ought to rely on other people’s experiences – for the simple reason that, typically, we are not in the right place and time to ‘repeat’ the experiences ourselves, and, as Kant’s presumptive principle asserts, we have no right to doubt the credibility and honesty of a testifier, unless there is convincing evidence to the contrary.

As mentioned earlier, knowledge acquired via testimony, is no more tentative than knowledge based on first-hand experience. Any demand for ‘apodictic certainty’⁵¹ is misplaced when it comes to contingent matters and, a fortiori, also in the case of testimony. But this does not preclude there being ‘empirical certainty’ in testimonial knowledge: ‘Empirical certainty is certainty through one’s own experience or through other people’s testimony. This is historical certainty, and one can often believe other people’s testimony more than one can believe one’s own experience’.⁵²

The *possibility* of (empirical) knowledge being communicated via testimony, together with the presumptive principle that follows from taking seriously the similarity between our, and our interlocutors’, epistemic predicament is sufficient to render testimonial knowledge an undeniable

such as Christian Thomasius and Christian August Crusius (for a brief discussion, see Danneberg, 1997: 315f.).

⁴⁸ *AA*, XXIV.2, 749f.; my italics.

⁴⁹ *BL*, 59.

⁵⁰ *BL*, 59.

⁵¹ See, e.g., *Pölitiz Logic*, ‘On Certainty’; *AA*, XXIV.2, 560f.

⁵² *AA*, XXIV.2, *Pölitiz Logic*, 560.

reality; acknowledging further that testimony is also a *practical necessity* only serves to strengthen this view.

The depth of Kant's commitment to testimony as an essential, and not merely optional, ingredient of our cognitive life, can hardly be overestimated. In one of his earlier *Reflexionen*, Kant writes: 'The skill (*Fertigkeit*) to assign each historical probability the appropriate endorsement, *is also [a form of] thinking*'.⁵³ On Kant's account, this ability is matched by a skill to reject a 'historically probable testimony for the sake of reasonable probability', that is, when the testimony conflicts with what we know to be true (or likely) on the basis of Reason alone.⁵⁴ This skill to exercise caution (*Bedachtsamkeit*), however, cannot be conceptualized as inferentialist reasoning from evidence, for Kant draws a clear distinction between experiences and inferences based on experiences: 'Inferences based on experience must not be confused with experiences'.⁵⁵ Thus, if one of the basic functions of testimony is to furnish us with the experiences of others, then, given Kant's clear distinction between experiences and inferences based on them, this purpose could not be realized in a purely inferential fashion. Elsewhere Kant is quite explicit about the anti-inferentialist thrust of his project: 'What is now important is to determine what entitles me to hold mediated experience [=testimony] in the same esteem as direct experience – this is what grounds authority'.⁵⁶ Kant, of course, does not deny that testimony is indirect, whereas perception is direct, but he insists that testimony is not thereby epistemically inferior to direct experience. The authority of testimony is not derived in an inferentialist fashion from more basic direct experiences; instead, it is grounded in the fact that, as far as our epistemic entitlement is concerned, experience presented to us by testimony is on a par with perceptual experience. Rather than by inferential reasoning, the adoption of testimony works by 'tying together the experiences of others with our own' and spotting an inconsistency, or a violation of an independently known universal truth of Reason, when one occurs. Such transpersonal extension of the domain of experiences hinges on our own experiences being continuous with those of others (at least as far as knowledge claims are concerned), and, in agreement with the textual evidence quoted earlier, this is clearly a view Kant endorses.

⁵³ AA, XVI, 508; *Reflexion* 2780; my italics.

⁵⁴ Given that the *Reflexion* in question (No. 2780) has been dated back to the β^1 phase (1752–1755/6), that is, to a time before the 1770s, when Kant began to reject philosophical uses of probability (see Cataldi Madonna 1992: 26–31), the use of the term 'probability' in the present quotation should not be misunderstood as an endorsement of any process of 'weighing probabilistic evidence', or some such. If anything, Kant's point that no amount of 'historically' (=empirically) probable evidence can overrule a competing judgement of Reason indicates that, even in this earlier period, Kant regarded Reason as the ultimate arbiter in fundamental matters (such as moral principles or universal truths), whenever these are decidable.

⁵⁵ AA, XVI, 495.

⁵⁶ AA, XXIV.2, *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, 750.

TESTIMONY, AUTONOMY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

It seems fair to say that Kant is generally regarded as the enlightenment thinker *par excellence*, not least because of the concise and highly influential definition he gives in his famous *Answer to the question: What is enlightenment?* (1784):

*Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority [selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit]. Minority is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.*⁵⁷

It is part and parcel of this rhetoric that the demand to think for oneself is imperative for each and every human being; that, first and foremost, it is a demand on individuals. The German word *Unmündigkeit*, translated above as 'minority', has the strong connotation of an inability 'to speak one's mind' and of its being a developmental stage that must be overcome in order to qualify as a fully responsible human being.⁵⁸ Thus, the enlightenment project is closely linked to the notion of autonomy. As a result, in making their case for an individualist theory of (epistemic or moral) autonomy, many philosophers call upon Kant as their chief witness, and, as mentioned in the Introduction, even those philosophers who are sympathetic towards social epistemology have tended to agree.⁵⁹ Indeed, much of Kant's critical philosophy, when considered against the backdrop of the enlightenment demand for autonomy, can be – and frequently has been – read as an attempt to 'sharpen' the individual's faculties of cognition by uncovering the law-like ways in which they operate and combine. The question then arises how this purported individualism can be squared with Kant's position on testimony as developed in the previous section.

In order to shed light on this connection, it is instructive to take a closer look at a place where several of the major themes of Kant's philosophy converge – the notion of 'enlightenment', the analysis of our faculties of cognition, the concept of autonomy. One such place is §40 of the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant discusses the notion of *sensus communis*. First, he notes that one would trivialize the notion were one to interpret *sensus communis* merely as vulgar 'common sense'. The German translation of the

⁵⁷The translation follows the Cambridge edition, (Kant, 1784: 17).

⁵⁸In this respect it is similar to the English word 'infancy', which in jurisprudence retains its (otherwise obsolete) meaning of 'the state of being a minor'.

⁵⁹On the tension between Kant's principle of autonomy and contemporary individualist conceptions of autonomy, see O'Neill, 2004.

Latin term, ‘*Gemeinsinn*’, has strong moral overtones and can also be understood as ‘public spirit’ or ‘civic sense’. Hence, *sensus communis* is a form of ‘common’ sense not so much because of its merely being widely accepted but because it is something which is genuinely shared by a community. In Kant’s own words:

By ‘*sensus communis*’, however, we must understand the idea of a *communitarian* [*gemeinschaftlichen*] sense, i.e., a capacity of judging, which in its reflection pays respect in thought (a priori) of everybody else’s way of representing, *as if* in order to keep its judgment to human reason as a whole and thereby escape the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment.⁶⁰

That Kant attributes great weight to the notion of *sensus communis* can be seen from the fact that he presents a detailed discussion of its fundamental principles, even if this means deviating from the main line of argument in the *Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments* (§§30–54).⁶¹ He identifies three maxims that are constitutive of *sensus communis*: ‘1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself’.⁶² It is worth noting that Kant regards these maxims as, on the one hand, of indirect propaedeutic value for the critique of taste he develops in the subsequent sections of the *Critique of Judgment* and, on the other hand, as essential to a proper understanding of the notion of ‘enlightenment’. For it is failure to adhere to the first maxim – ‘the maxim of a reason that is never passive’ – which leads to a variety of *prejudices*, ‘of which the greatest is to imagine nature as not being subject to those rules which the understanding has constitutively imposed on it [*ihr zu Grunde gelegt*] by means of its own essential law: i.e., *superstition*’. Kant goes on to introduce the notion of enlightenment as a ‘merely negative element’: ‘Liberation from superstition is called *enlightenment*’.⁶³

The fact that the character of enlightenment is ‘merely negative’ in the sense that it aims at eliminating prejudice, has direct implications for the scope of Kant’s demand ‘to think for oneself’. This slogan only acquires force as an enlightenment maxim if, and to the extent that, it is directed against prejudice, and it is therefore important to become clearer about what the nature of prejudice is. Kant gives a whole taxonomy of kinds of prejudice⁶⁴, of which one is itself intimately related to testimony. Kant calls this the ‘logical prejudice’ of ‘authority’ (*Ansehen*) of the speaker: ‘When one

⁶⁰*Critique of Judgment* (henceforth, *CJ*), B157.

⁶¹Kant makes due apologies for the digression. (*CJ*, §40, B160).

⁶²*CJ*, B158.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴For example in *BL*, 139ff.

places all too blind trust in someone's reason [*Vernunft*], and regards what this or that famous man asserts as infallible; then from this derives the *praeiudicium autoritatis*'.⁶⁵ Thus, we are in danger of adopting prejudice whenever we accept what Kant elsewhere calls a 'proposition of reason' (*Vernunftwahrheit*) without exercising our own rational capacities.⁶⁶ The demand to 'think for oneself' cautions against adopting such propositions merely on the basis of other people's say-so. But note that this only applies to propositions of reason, not to testimony generally. As we saw in the preceding section, Kant makes abundantly clear that propositions of reason do not qualify as testimony in the same way that statements regarding matters of fact do, except in the purely *formaliter* sense which Kant rejects. The very fact that propositions of reason are such that every rational being can come to know them by properly exercising their *own* capacity to reason excludes them from testimony: 'If a cognition is constituted in such a way that it can simply be made out by one's understanding; then the authority of others is no genuine ground of holding-to-be-true'.⁶⁷

When thus placed in the context of the distinction between propositions of reason and empirical facts, Kant's demand to 'think for oneself' suddenly appears much more accommodating to testimony. While it imposes limits on our reliance on the word of others, these limits are by no means overly narrow. In particular, they leave room for a presumptive acceptance of empirical testimony; indeed, as Kant acknowledged earlier, such testimony provides us with knowledge that we could not otherwise obtain. It is, thus, perfectly rational to rely on such testimony, provided this reliance is not 'uncritical' (in the sense described earlier): 'Historical belief is reasonable [*vernünftig*] if it is critical'.⁶⁸ Being 'critical' does neither require nor demand that we be able to construct, by rational argument, a 'positive case' each time we accept someone's testimony.⁶⁹ Rather, it means that we must not adopt testimonial beliefs in a dogmatic fashion that ignores that testimony, just like experience, is always fallible. Staying attuned to the fallibility of knowledge claims, while avoiding any slippery slope leading to scepticism, is what 'being critical' is all about. Thus, we must be ready to revise our

⁶⁵BL, 139.

⁶⁶In this regard, Kant closely engages with Meier who, in §236 of the *Vernunftlehre*, writes that it is 'a proof that one is biased by prejudice if one also accepts as true, on the basis of other people's testimony, truths which do not consist in the reality of matters', i.e., (non-empirical) propositions of reason.

⁶⁷WL, 584.

⁶⁸AA.XVI, 501; *Reflexion* 2763.

⁶⁹This is corroborated by a remark in a footnote to the essay *What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, where Kant writes:

To make use of one's *own* reason means no more than to ask oneself, whenever one is supposed to assume something: whether one would find it expedient [*tunlich*] to make the ground why one assumes something, or the rule that follows from what one assumes, into a universal principle for one's use of reason.

(Kant 1786: 60)

(testimonial) beliefs, for example when a comparison of our own judgments with those of others gives us reason to suspect that we are in error. This is what justifies an attitude of presumptive acceptance in the first place. In one of his *Reflexionen*, Kant gives an aphoristic, yet nonetheless succinct characterization of this overall method: ‘The critical method suspends judgment in the anticipation that it will attain it’.⁷⁰

The significance of one’s ability to ‘think in the position of everyone else’ is clear: it indicates the opposite of being prejudiced, namely being ‘broad-minded’. As such, it is more of an attitude than a skill or (natural) capacity:

[T]he issue here is not the faculty of cognition, but the *way of thinking* [*Denkungsart*] needed to make purposive use of it, which, however small the scope and degree of a person’s natural endowment may be, nevertheless reveals a man of a *broad-minded way of thinking* if he sets himself apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment, within which so many others are as if bracketed, and reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by putting himself into the standpoint of others).

(*Critique of Judgment* §40, Cambridge edition, 1998)

Our ability, in general, to ‘think in the position of everyone else’ would be extremely limited were it not for the fact that it is matched by an ‘aptitude of human beings for communicating their thoughts’ (*Critique of Judgment*, §40). As Onora O’Neill puts it, for Kant ‘thought itself presupposes possible audiences, hence pluralities of potential thinkers, speakers and communicators’ (O’Neill 2001: 42). In his essay *What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* (1786) Kant gives emphatic expression to this thesis:

Of course it is said that the freedom to speak or write could be taken from us by a superior power, but the freedom to think cannot be. Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community of others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!

(see AA, VIII, 144; quoted after O’Neill 2001: 42)

The political dimension of this demand for freedom of publication (or, as Kant likes to put it, ‘freedom of the pen’⁷¹) is obvious and has often been noted. However, it is important to realize that the emphatic appeal to communication as a necessary condition of our own thinking is not merely a rhetorical device, but has wider significance. This can be seen by comparing the quotation above with analogous passages in Kant’s lectures on logic, which, unlike his popular essays, were never intended as public

⁷⁰ AA, XVI, 459; *Reflexion* 2665.

⁷¹ See, e.g., AA, XV, 672; *Reflexion* 1482.

pronouncements in the service of a liberal cause. Yet they convey the same sentiment, expressed most rigorously in the *Bauch Logic*:

We do not only have a propensity to participate [in society] but also to communicate. Man only learns something so as to be able to communicate it to others. He does not trust his own judgment, unless he has told it to others. Everything is unimportant to us if we cannot communicate it to others.

(BL, 55)

Kant's point is not merely a descriptive one about the realities of human sociality. Rather, he regards communicability (and, as we shall see shortly, actual communication) as a normative 'touchstone' of truth. In the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, titled 'On having opinions, knowing, and believing' (A 820, B 848f.), Kant makes communicability a fundamental criterion by which to distinguish cases of mere opining (on the basis of persuasion) from believing something to be knowledge (on the basis of testimony):

The touchstone of whether taking something to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore, externally, the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for the reason of every human being to take it to be true; for in that case there is at least a presumption that the ground of the agreement of all judgments, regardless of the difference among the subjects, rests on the common ground, namely the object, with which they therefore all agree and through which the truth of the judgment is proved.⁷²

Similarly, in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant writes that 'cognitions and judgments must...be able to be universally communicated' and that, furthermore, we must assume the existence of a *sensus communis* 'as a necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which must be presupposed [*vorausgesetzt*] in every logic and every principle of cognitions that is not sceptical' (CJ, §21, B65).

REASON AND THE CONDITIONS OF COMMUNICATION

Communicability as described in the previous section is, of course, a very different thing from actual *communication*, and it must therefore be analysed to what extent communicability depends upon actual testimony for its role as a source of normativity. To this end, it is instructive to begin by

⁷²*Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth, *CPR*) 685 = A820/B848f. The translation follows the Cambridge edition.

examining the view Kant is arguing against, and which he calls ‘logical egoism’:⁷³

(Logical egoism is a *selfish prejudice*.) This is not merely self-conceit, but a kind of logical principle, which deems *superfluous* the criterion of truth: *to compare one's opinions with those of other people* . . . The principle of indifference etc. to the judgments of others in comparison with my own is the principle of logical egoism.⁷⁴

Communicability, as Kant conceives of it, is not a merely derivative phenomenon but is constitutive of reliable judgments concerning the truth of matters of fact. The point of communicability is not the (perhaps trivial) fact that the content of knowledge claims, beliefs, and opinions is propositional and, thus, expressible in a language; rather, its role consists precisely in furnishing us with a means of distinguishing between knowledge, beliefs, and opinions, by allowing others to scrutinize, challenge and correct our own judgements. In the *Bauch Logic*, Kant illustrates this ‘validating’ function of communicability using a very apt metaphor: ‘Man always wishes to test his judgment on others; other people’s judgments are to be regarded as *contrôleurs* of our own judgment’.⁷⁵ Other people’s judgements, of course, are typically available to us through their testimony only, which is why an attitude of presumptive acceptance – in the spirit of the ‘critical method’ outlined earlier – is called for.

It is important to realize that Kant’s conception of communicability as a ‘touchstone’, or ‘criterion’, of truth requires both that communication of one’s own thoughts is possible under the given circumstances, and that we display a general readiness to critically accept other people’s testimony, since it is through testimony that we learn about other people’s judgments. If either of the two requirements fails to be met, communication fails to lead to epistemic progress. This is most obvious in cases when communicability is limited due to external restrictions (e.g. censorship): ‘It is unfair to condemn people to keep all their judgments to themselves; for they must express themselves, lest they not lose the strong criterion of truth: to compare their judgments with the judgments of others’.⁷⁶ It may be tempting to read this passage solely as a defence of the right to self-expression. However, Kant’s main concern is not with limitations of self-expression *per se*, but with the threat such limitations pose to our ability to test our judgements against the critical judgements of others. It is only *to the extent that we are deprived of the opportunity to receive critical feedback* from other people that restrictions

⁷³For a historical sketch of the etymology of the term ‘egoism’ and its philosophical uses, see Hinske, 1998: 80–2.

⁷⁴*AA*, XXIV.2, *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, 740.

⁷⁵*BL*, 55.

⁷⁶*AA*, XXIV.2, *Dohna-Wundlacken Logic*, 740.

on expressing our own judgements are unjust. This has obvious implications for the initial question of the relation between testimony and communicability. For, if self-expression derives its justification first and foremost from the possibility of criticism by others, then clearly the normative role of communicability cannot be separated from an attitude of presumptive acceptance of testimony, to the extent that the latter is necessarily the prime source of learning about other people's judgements.

Before turning to a more concrete example which demonstrates that Kant thinks of the criterion of communicability not merely as an abstract thought experiment involving an isolated reasoner, but as something that serves a vital and very real epistemic function, it seems appropriate to reflect on the metaphilosophical implications of his views. For, Kant's philosophical strategy is often described as characterized by a 'standpoint of methodological solipsism' (e.g. Guyer 1997: 257), and it would seem that this is in tension with the picture painted in the present section, of Kant's quite fundamental acknowledgement of epistemic interdependence. Indeed this tension has led some commentators to accuse Kant of not offering any coherent argument regarding the role of communicability.⁷⁷ Such accusations, however, are due to a misunderstanding that arises from a failure to distinguish between two rather different projects which Kant pursues simultaneously. One is the familiar theme of searching for transcendental conditions that secure the possibility of experience *in general*. The other project consists in the – perhaps less ambitious, but no doubt equally important – epistemological project of analysing the conditions that make knowledge possible *in the given situations we find ourselves in*. Whereas the first project analyses the conditions of knowledge for a transcendental subject, the second project analyses the conditions of knowledge for us as finite social human beings. It is difficult to see how either project could possibly be reduced to the other, and hence there is no danger of incoherence if one assumes that an attitude of *methodological solipsism* may be appropriate in the former case, but not in the latter. Put crudely, methodological solipsism is quite simply not a matter of logic (nor of epistemology, to the extent that epistemology is concerned with actual knowledge rather than the transcendental conditions of the possibility of knowledge *in general*), and logical egoism is hardly a prerequisite of transcendental analysis.

On this account, were one to assimilate our *actual* epistemic situation to the hypothetical case of an isolated reasoner, then one would be guilty of something akin to a category mistake, since this would turn a merely *methodological device* – the hypothetical scenario of a rational being in complete doxastic isolation – into a 'kind of logical principle'. Such a move

⁷⁷See, e.g., Guyer, 1997: 260.

would indeed deprive us of the criterion of communicability, and its consequences could only be detrimental:

The one universal characteristic of madness is loss of *common sense* (*sensus communis*) and substitution of *logical private sense* (*sensus privatus*) for it... This [*sensus communis*] is a subjectively necessary criterion of the correctness of our judgments generally, and so too of the health of our understanding.⁷⁸

Throughout Kant's writings, whether in the logic, the *Anthropology* or his critical works, there is a sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, but always noticeable concern with the *reality* of our cognitive predicament, i.e. with the conditions of possibility of knowledge and cognition *as we know them*. This naturally includes the communicability of knowledge, no matter whether the context is one of everyday conversation between two people, scientific inquiry in a collaborative environment, or philosophical discourse where philosophers comment *on other* philosopher's views. Hence, even though an isolated epistemic subject may well be conceivable, and in a particular philosophical context, for example the Transcendental Deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, may well be the appropriate topic of analysis, it is, *as a matter of fact*, a fiction and as such of only limited usefulness in examining the conditions of validity of actual knowledge claims.

Further support for the thesis that Kant cares as much about the realities of knowledge as about its conditions of possibility can be gleaned from the fact that he acknowledges that testimony can not only communicate knowledge but, given the right circumstances, can also create it. A concrete example of the knowledge-generative role of testimony can be found in Kant's essay *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking*:

Historical belief, for example concerning the death of a great man, which is reported by some correspondence, *can become knowledge*, if the local authorities [*die Obrigkeit des Orts*] announce it, his funeral, his last will and testament, etc. That something can thus be historically held true, i.e. believed, on testimony only, for example that there is a city, Rome, in the world; and that someone who has never been there can nonetheless say: *I know*, and not just: *I believe* that there exists a [city called] Rome – both of these go well together.

(Kant 1786: 54)

Kant, in this quotation, obviously endorses the idea that testimony may be underwritten by further testimony, and that this is sufficient to turn mere belief into knowledge. It should also be noted that Kant speaks of 'knowledge', plain and simple, again without resorting to either probabilistic

⁷⁸ *Anthropology*; the translation follows Kant, 1798: 88. See also Collins, 1999: 7.

or evidentialist substitute notions. Given the context of the argument and the overall purpose of the essay, it is clear that the appeal to ‘local authorities’ does not render this an ‘argument from authority’. In learning about a person’s death through public announcements we are not being subjected to the authority of the administrative body that issues the announcement; rather, all else being equal, we come to know on the basis of the testimony we receive. Of course, if we had reason to doubt the veracity of the announcement, we could put our judgement to the test by inquiring further and comparing our own judgements with those of others, but as things stand, the rules by which such announcements do occur, seldom give reason to begin a detailed investigation.

Kant is fully aware that specific testimonial practices are culturally determined. In the *Vienna Logic*, he sketches how such practices have changed throughout history and contrasts ancient with modern practices: ‘Not a single historian among the ancients limits himself so pointedly to truths, but they always aim at writing beautifully’.⁷⁹ While such criticism of the overemphasis on rhetoric over accuracy is a familiar theme in enlightenment critiques of the ancients, it is interesting that Kant does not attribute it to a lack of epistemic responsibility on the part of the ancients, but instead to circumstance: The ancient world lacked certain standards of accuracy that, in modern times, are enforced through collective projects such as science (‘experimental physic’) and communication (‘institution of the postal service’): ‘Not until the beginning of the last century did people begin to realize that it is necessary, to tell the whole truth, and every one thus had to be wholly accurate in his reports, and if someone swerved from the truth only a little in his writings: then he would be embarrassed and dishonoured’.⁸⁰ Kant does *not* argue that all knowledge must be supported by experiment and science; rather, it is the presence of collective endeavours such as science and modern systems of communication (alongside the postal system he also specifically mentions the printing press and the emergence of newspapers) which warrants trust in the truthfulness of testimony, because it is through their presence that they set standards of accuracy and rules of communication to which people on the whole aspire. Elsewhere, Kant expresses his hope that such changes will advance the way in which the increasing ‘volume’ of knowledge may be handled by means of ‘critique [based on] Reason, of history and historical texts, a *general spirit* that aims at knowledge *en gros* and not just *en détail*’.⁸¹ It seems more than plausible to identify the term ‘general spirit’ in this passage with (one aspect of) the notion of *sensus communis* discussed earlier. This adds another layer to Kant’s overall endorsement of the ‘practical necessity’ (AA, XVI, 509) of epistemic interdependence, for it shows that the presence or absence of

⁷⁹AA, XXIV.2, 898f.

⁸⁰AA, XXIV.2, 898f.

⁸¹AA, XVI, 189; *Reflexion* 1998; emphasis added.

practices that ensure that the criteria laid down for the *sensus communis* – first and foremost, a willingness to revise one’s own judgment in the light of other people’s testimony – are fulfilled, is indeed a contingent matter. As Kant’s historical comparison shows, circumstances in ancient times were far more difficult than they are ‘now’ (at the time of writing). Yet, the mere fact that its presence is a contingent matter does not entail that the *sensus communis* cannot play a justificatory role. On the contrary, it is the very standard of justification that we must adhere to in our judgments: ‘For we have to attach our own understanding to the *understanding of other men* too, instead of *isolating* ourselves with our own understanding and still using our private ideas to judge *publicly*, so to speak’.⁸² Pointing out that human sociality, and the rules that govern social and epistemic intercourse, are ‘merely contingent’ facts, as for example Paul Guyer does when he speaks of ‘the assumption – here [in Kant’s text] taken for granted – that there are in fact others with whom we can communicate’ (Guyer 1997: 259), does nothing to undermine their actual normative significance. Just how deep the need for epistemic sociality runs, is best illustrated by a final quotation from Kant:

The social life of man shows: [... that] he stands in need of sociality – without it he cannot live ... We do not only have a propensity to participate [in society] but also to communicate. *Man only learns something so as to be able to communicate it to others...* The inclination towards sociality and communicating his judgments to others is so natural to man that he cannot move himself to giving up on it without gradually growing grumpy and depressed.⁸³

CONCLUSION

When it is sometimes assumed, or argued, that in Kant’s philosophy ‘there is no reliance on testimony’ (Schmitt 1987: 47), then I hope the reader will agree that this view has been proved wrong by the preceding discussion. However, one should not rush to heap blame on contemporary proponents of this view, for they are in good company: a whole historical tradition, associated with German idealism, used to regard Kant as a philosopher of subjectivity who had no concern for the historical and social aspects of the human condition. (See Höffe 2003: 337f.) In part, this may be due to the fact that those elements of his critical philosophy for which Kant is most famous – the transcendental apperception, the a priori categories, the search for conditions of experience *in general* – are indeed largely ahistorical and asocial. Yet even the textual evidence that is present in the critical works should have been enough to cast doubt on this interpretation – one need only think of the discussion of communicability as a touchstone of truth

⁸² *Anthropology*; the translation follows Kant, 1798: 88.

⁸³ *BL*, 55; emphasis added.

(*Critique of Pure Reason*), or of the discussion of the *sensus communis* in the *Critique of Judgment* (§40). Drawing on a more complete selection of texts, however, has helped to bring out the importance of epistemic interdependence, and of testimony in particular, to Kant's thought, and it will be instructive to briefly review the core ideas of his epistemology of testimony.

Kant not only maintains that testimony can, and frequently does, produce knowledge, but he also acknowledges its ineliminability. He reminds us that in accepting testimony we can have certainty, or at any rate the same sort of certainty – moral, not theoretical – that can be had from first-hand experience. Testimony widens the scope of experience, and knowledge thus acquired is different neither in kind nor in degree from other empirical knowledge. Incredulity – that is, rejection of testimony as a source of knowledge, simply because no theoretically necessary ground for its truth can be given – is blameworthy; dismissing another person's word for no good reason is a violation of epistemic equity and indicates a lack of moral character. In this regard, incredulity is of a piece with logical egoism: It demonstrates an unwillingness or inability to think oneself in the place of others, yet this we must be prepared to do if we are to trust our own judgements. The logical definition of the *sensus communis* includes this demand as one desideratum in its list of three criteria for any acceptable epistemic attitude, the other two being criticism and consistency. In addition to its characterization in logical terms, the *sensus communis* has a very real empirical counterpart in the actual epistemic practices that are in place in a given community at a given time. It is, one might say, just as much a 'common sense' as it is a communal 'general spirit' in which epistemic interactions are being carried out. For Kant, a precondition of rationality is that, as O'Neill puts it, 'uses of reason must have *law-like* rather than *lawless* structure, but since they are not to derive their law-likeness from any external sources, this law-likeness will have to be *self-legislated*'. (O'Neill 2001: 44) In adopting the general principles that characterize the *sensus communis* and that manifest themselves in different contingent ways depending on social and historical context, individuals achieve just that: They autonomously judge in accordance with principles. The fact that the precise nature of these principles cannot be determined independent of context does not undermine their normative significance. Indeed, if the principles in question concern judgements about testimonial matters, then some degree of contingency is to be expected.⁸⁴ Also, as Kant asserts time and again, testimony is about matters of fact – that is, about states of affairs that may or may not obtain – and not about propositions of reason (such as moral truths). Since only the latter may be decidable by reflection alone and can be the subject of universal laws, 'law-likeness' is the best one can hope for in the case of testimony. Yet, in this case, the best is also good enough, since, in order to be rational, we must neither forego the opportunity of

⁸⁴See Łuków, 2003, for a discussion of this point.

adopting (readily available) knowledge on the basis of testimony, nor ignore the principles – contingent though they may be – that govern testimonial interaction. One significant corollary of this is that we are under no special obligation (and in fact would risk slipping into ‘logical egoism’ were we to believe otherwise), to ascertain the reliability of testimony (beyond the fact that it was adopted on common principles), for example by accumulating and weighing empirical evidence in support of its truth. When we accept testimony, Kant urges us, we ought to do so as a matter of principle, not as the result of bargaining for the truth.

Department of History and Philosophy of Science
University of Cambridge

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