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Essay review

The pasts, presents, and futures of testimony

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A Critical Introduction to Testimony, Axel Gelfert. Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York (2014). 257 pp., Price £22.99 paperback, ISBN: 9781441193506

1. Introduction

The past twenty years or so have witnessed a sea-change in mainstream epistemology. No longer is the focus on construction of definitions of knowledge, perception, memory, testimony, etc., on the basis of intuitions about their applicability in particular instances and observations of the ways in which they figure in ordinary linguistic usage. Instead, there is general recognition of the instability of our intuitions and usages, of the mutable "family resemblance" constitution of such epistemological concepts, and of the need for close engagement with other disciplines and practices in which they play central roles. It is now widely held, and has been argued with icy rigour by Timothy Williamson, that there are no distinctive methods peculiar to epistemology; rather, it shares a whole range of modes of reflection and inquiry with other disciplines of the sciences and humanities: mathematics, logic, linguistics, physics, cognitive science, economics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc.[1]

In this "new epistemology" the criteria of adequacy for an epistemological theory are many and various. Whilst not cowering before them, the theory should come to terms with ordinary language usage and intuitions about applicability, either endorsing them or explaining them away. Likewise, it should respect rival theories, not merely aiming counter-arguments at them, but also explaining why they may have seemed plausible to their adherents. It should engage closely with "best practices", both as they figure in everyday life and as exercised in specialised disciplines, illuminating the ways in which both lay and expert persons pursue their inquiries.[2] It should take due account of recent findings in psychology and cognitive science. Further, insofar as the epistemological concepts are involved in communication and collaboration, theories about them should engage with their social roles and the associated moral stances. The force of this last requirement is a contentious matter. On some accounts what is needed is merely a degree of consistency with these social roles and moral stances. On other ("genealogical") accounts, the theory is to be based on these roles and stances, whether viewed as constants grounded in a "State of Nature" or seen as subject to evolutionary, historical and cultural change. This shift of epistemology away from strict analysis towards more pragmatic approaches, engaged with practice, social roles and history, is nowhere more in evidence than in the flourishing field of studies of testimony.

2. Gelfert's book

Gelfert rightly notes that much of the recent outburst of interest in testimony can be traced back to C. A. J. Coady's seminal work of 1992, *Testimony: A philosophical study*.[3] This book fuelled a number of key debates, e.g. about the definition of testimony, whether confined to statements about live questions competently offered as evidence (as by Coady himself), or more broadly construed so as to admit certain cases in which there is no such intentional communication (e. g., reading private diaries, overhearing conversations, etc.). Another lively discussion concerns the relations of testimony to other forms of evidence, and the cognate issue of whether testimonial justification can be reduced to other forms of justification (especially, justification from direct perceptual acquaintance). Then there is the issue of the generative power of testimony. Is the function of testimony the transmission of knowledge from

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[1] Williamson (2007).

[2] Cf. Lipton (2007), as cited by Gelfert (2014), pp. 137–8.

[3] Gelfert (2014), p. 2.

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speaker to speaker—a view according to which, as Jennifer Lackey memorably puts it, "the picture we have of testimonial knowledge is like a chain of people passing buckets of water to put out a fire"?[4] Or can it be allowed, with Lackey, that the transmission of testimony can itself be epistemically generative, with the recipient acquiring knowledge from statements issuing from those who lack that knowledge? Finally, there is a whole series of moral issues concerning the roles of sincerity, trustworthiness and trust in the production and spreading of knowledge and in the facilitation of collaborative enterprises.

In the first eight chapters of his book Gelfert engages with these issues in turn, cautiously developing his own account of testimony and its justification. In the two following chapters 9 and 10 he applies his theoretical conclusions to specific, "down-to-earth" issues: the nature of expertise; expert testimony and the ways in which laypersons can assess it; the relations between testimony and such more questionable forms of communication as small talk, rumour, scandalmongering, etc. In the final chapter 11 he discusses genealogical approaches to the concept of testimony — approaches that seek to cast light on it by considering ways in which it did, or could have, originated and developed. In a brief postscript he complements his discussion of these treatments by glancing at genealogical issues of more overtly historical kinds. Here he also raises the question of the impacts of the escalating differentiation of specialist knowledge and of the ever-increasing speed and reach of our communication technologies on the ways in which we conceive of testimony.

Gelfert's book is the very first systematic survey of the expanding philosophical sub-discipline that he calls "the epistemology of testimony".[5] The work is engagingly written and a model of clarity. Throughout it invites readers to think for themselves, each chapter being followed by "study questions" and suggestions for further reading, and with alluringly tentative indications of profitable new lines of research being offered in the final chapter and its postscript. His coverage of the field is remarkable, with the principal theoretical issues all addressed and a good survey of some of the main areas of practical application, notably assessment of legal testimony and adjudication between expert witnesses.

Gelfert presents his own views modestly and only after unbiased and sensitive reviews of the positions taken by others. The opening chapters set the stage for his "hybrid" theory by setting up a series of dichotomies: broad vs narrow definitions of testimony; speaker-oriented vs hearer-oriented treatments; internalist vs externalist theories of justification; and, crucially, accounts of testimonial justification that require reduction to justification from perception, memory, and reasoning vs "fundamentalist", i.e. non-reductive accounts that allow default acceptance of testimony, thus recognising it as a fundamental source of knowledge. In Ch. 5 Gelfert rehearses the standard objections to reductionist and non-reductionist theories of justification: respectively, that the former place impossible burdens of verification on hearers, and that the latter license gullibility. Ch. 6 considers hybrid theories, notably that of Lackey, which explicates testimonial justification in terms of a combination of external criteria relating to the reliability of the speaker with internal reasons for belief possessed by the hearer.[6] Gelfert suggests that Lackey's and similar accounts "set the bar very high".[7] He then advances his own hybrid theory, grounded in inference to the best explanation. According to this theory, default acceptance of testimony is justified insofar as the reliability of testimony in the absence of contra-indications figures in the best explanation of the success of our collaborative enterprises. Rejection of testimony is, however, justified when there are contra-indications, "reflection triggers" indicative of a best explanation that "renders what is asserted improbable or unreliable".[8]

Gelfert's hybrid theory has many virtues. It overcomes the weaknesses of the principal rival accounts: unlike anti-reductionist default acceptance theories, it avoids the charge of licensing gullibility, while approving the hearer's trusting attitude under appropriate circumstances; and, unlike reductionist accounts and certain other hybrid accounts, it avoids the charge of placing impossible burdens on recipients of testimony, while insisting on due wariness under suspicious circumstances. It also does full justice to the roles of social settings and collaborative enterprises in the justification of testimony. A further and notable virtue of Gelfert's inference to the best explanation based account is its flexibility, openness and suggestiveness of further lines of research.

In his concluding chapters Gelfert touches on a series of currently debated questions concerning the formation and social functions of our concept and practices of testimony, their historical development, and the impact on them of digital technologies. We now offer some reflections on these issues.

3. Genealogies

In the words of Bernard Williams, genealogical approaches are those that seek to explicate a concept "by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about".[9] In the final chapter Gelfert follows Geuss in emphasising how such accounts serve effectively to undermine the intuitions on which analytical definitions of epistemological concepts are based.[10] His discussion focuses on two such genealogies, both tying the concept of knowledge to that of sound testimony and both grounded in an imagined State of Nature. The first is Edward Craig's story of development of the concept of knowledge through "objectification", detachment from the particular circumstances of the inquirer and informant, of the practically indispensable notion of a person likely on a given occasion to be a good informant.[11] Gelfert goes on to consider Williams' own elaboration of Craig's story through attention to real "cultural contingencies and history", a "thickening" through which the notion of a good informant becomes tied to the recognition of accuracy and sincerity not merely as instrumental, but as intrinsic goods.

Gelfert maintains that "an evolutionary perspective on the emergence of our concept of knowledge both broadens and modifies" State of Nature stories of the kinds presented by Craig and Williams.[12] And elsewhere he offers just such an evolutionary broadening and modification, in which the emergence of the concept of knowledge is plausibly related to a variety of selective pressures in addition to that of the need to tag good informants.[13] While endorsing his view that State of Nature stories and evolutionary hypotheses may complement each other, we note that evolutionary explanation and State of Nature explication are markedly different enterprises, and not easily integrated into a unified story. As Craig and Williams admit, and as Gelfert himself shows in some detail, if taken as empirical hypotheses these State of Nature stories are utterly implausible, if not altogether

[4] Lackey (1999), cited by Gelfert (2014), p. 147.
[5] Gelfert (2014), p. 1.
[6] Lackey (2008).
[7] Gelfert (2014), p. 129.
[8] See also Gelfert (2010a), which presents a somewhat fuller version.
[9] Williams (2002), p. 20, cited by Gelfert (2014), p. 217.
[10] Gelfert (2014), p. 216; Geuss (2002).
[11] Craig (1990).
[12] Gelfert (2014), p. 223.
[13] Gelfert (2011).