



Fricker on testimonial justification

Igor Douven, Stefaan E. Cuypers

Institute of Philosophy, University of Leuven, Kardinaal Mercierplein 2 - bus 3200, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Fricker has recently proposed a principle aimed at stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for testimonial justification. Her proposal entails that a hearer is justified in believing a speaker's testimony only if she recognizes the speaker to be trustworthy, which, given Fricker's internalist commitments, requires the hearer to have within her epistemic purview grounds which justify belief in the speaker's trustworthiness. We argue that, as it stands, Fricker's principle is too demanding, and we propose some amendments to it. We further discuss the viability of her internalist approach to testimony.

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1. Introduction

It is uncontroversial that testimony plays an indispensable role in our epistemic lives, and that many of our beliefs rely for their justification, partly or even wholly, on the word of others. A central debate in the epistemology of testimony concerns the conditions for testimonial justification, that is, the necessary and sufficient conditions for being justified in believing a proposition on the basis of trust in someone else's testimony. Elizabeth Fricker (2006a, p. 232) has recently proposed the following principle as stating these conditions:¹

Testimony Deferential Acceptance Principle (TDAP) One properly accepts that P on the basis of trust in another's testimony that P iff

- (i) she speaks sincerely;
- (ii) she is epistemically well enough placed with respect to P so that were she to have, or make a judgement to form,

a conscious belief regarding whether P, her belief would almost certainly be knowledge;

- (iii) she is better epistemically placed with respect to P than oneself;
- (iv) one recognizes all these things to be so;
- (v) one is not aware of significant contrary testimony regarding P.

On Fricker's terminological usage, clause (ii) is supposed to capture the requirement that the speaker be *competent* with respect to P; a speaker who is both sincere and competent with respect to P is also said to be *trustworthy* as regards P.

In addition to incorporating externalist elements, via clauses (i), (ii), and (iii), TDAP is explicitly meant also to incorporate internalist ones, via (iv) and (v). It is, for instance, not enough that the speaker is trustworthy; one must also *recognize* that this is the case. Besides, the notion of justification, implicit in TDAP via (at least) 'knowledge' in clause (ii) and 'recognizes' in clause (iv), is supposed to be internalist in the standard sense. So, for instance,

E-mail addresses: igor.douven@hiw.kuleuven.be; stefaan.cuypers@hiw.kuleuven.be

¹ While Fricker nowhere explicitly equates 'proper acceptance' with justified belief, it is hard to see what else she could plausibly mean by the former. Authorial intentions aside, we hope to show that her principle concerning proper acceptance may well serve as a good launching point for stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for testimonial justification. We further note that what we call 'TDAP' is in effect her principle TDAP 2; it is a completion of the principle she calls 'TDAP 1', which only states necessary conditions for testimonial justification. Finally, TDAP is not intended to pertain to cases of acceptance on the basis of what Fricker calls 'simple trust', that is, the 'trusting response to what others tell or teach us, by one who as yet lacks the conceptual resources to entertain doubts about the reliability of others' teaching' (Fricker, 2006a, p. 245 n.).

(iv) is meant to imply that one has grounds for believing the speaker to be trustworthy that are within one's epistemic purview.² At various places in her writings Fricker has discussed the types of such grounds that, she thinks, may be available to a hearer.

This essay is intended as a constructive criticism of Fricker's position on testimony. In particular, we argue that, as it stands, TDAP is intuitively too demanding, and we suggest some amendments to it (Section 2). We further argue, in Section 3, that an internalist approach to testimony may be hard to maintain if the potential grounds for believing a speaker to be trustworthy are limited to the types of grounds Fricker considers. However, in Section 4 we then argue that such an approach may be viable nonetheless, because Fricker overlooks an important type of potential grounds for trust.

2.

We focus on clauses (ii) and (iv), since we would like to claim that they specifically make TDAP overly demanding. Starting with (ii), the key question to be asked is why the speaker's belief should almost certainly be *knowledge*. Why should it (almost certainly) satisfy the fourth—'anti-Gettier'—condition of knowledge? Does it even need to be justified?

Consider the anti-Gettier condition first. Suppose you are being told by a person you know to be perfectly reliable—let us call her 'Regina'—that a colleague of hers is currently instructing a group of people about a certain domain D that is beyond your expertise. Regina further tells you that everything these people are being taught about D is true, and also that they are provided with justifying reasons for everything they are being taught, but that these reasons have been tinkered with in such a way that with respect to each of their beliefs in matters concerning D, the people will be in a Gettier situation after the instruction.³ Now you meet them after the instruction and they enthusiastically tell you various things they have been taught about D. Should you care about the fact that they are in a Gettier situation with respect to each of the things they tell you and withhold belief in those things? But why would you? Given what your completely reliable informant Regina told you, you know that what they tell you is true, and thereby *you* come to know each of these things, even if they do not know any of them (but have merely justified true beliefs in them).

It might be objected that in the above case you do not really accept the propositions *on the basis of trust* in the speakers' testimonies (if you accept them indeed) but rather treat the speakers as reliable measuring devices, much like you would treat a thermometer you know to be a reliable indicator of temperature, and accept the propositions *on that basis*.⁴ But consider that Regina, who informed you about the speakers' epistemic situation, said

nothing about whether the speakers are *sincere*. If, for some reason, you get the impression that they are not telling you the truths they have been told by the instructor, but instead are trying to deceive you, then to accept what they tell you would pre-theoretically seem to be wrong. On the other hand, if you do accept what they tell you, and you do so on the basis of the fact that you take their testimonies to be sincere, together with the fact that you take them to have justified true beliefs in those propositions, then it seems to accord perfectly well with our common understanding of the notion of trust (vague as it may be) to say that you accept what they tell you on the basis of trust in their testimonies.^{5,6}

It would be equally wrong to object that you do not accept the propositions *solely* on the basis of trust in the speakers' testimonies, but also on the basis of trust in your informant Regina. This would be wrong because TDAP allows anyway that your recognizing that conditions (i)–(iii) obtain depends, partly or even wholly, on the testimony of others, and so it does not require that acceptance be solely on the basis of trust in the speaker's testimony. It is a further question whether acceptance, if it is to be proper, can *ultimately* rely on some person's testimony. But, by itself, TDAP is entirely neutral as regards this question.⁷ Anyway, in the example we might as well suppose that you have perceptual or other nontestimonial evidence for the reliability of Regina.

The anti-Gettier condition aside, why should we care about whether the speaker is *justified* in believing her testimony? Wouldn't it be enough if the speaker had merely formed a true belief? The answer to this question, we believe, is negative. For let (ii') be like (ii) except that 'knowledge' has been supplanted by 'true'. Further suppose that the speaker owns a ticket in what is commonly known to be a large and fair lottery with only one winner, and that she forms the belief that her ticket is a loser. Her assertion to that effect will then be sincere and, given the number of tickets in the lottery, it is also almost certainly true. So both (i) and (ii') would be satisfied. Would (iii) be satisfied? It certainly *might* be. Suppose that the hearer only knows that the lottery contains over 1,000 tickets, but that the speaker knows the exact number of tickets in the lottery (say, five million). The speaker would then seem to be better placed with respect to the proposition that her ticket is a loser than the hearer. Nothing said so far excludes, or even makes it unlikely, that the remaining clauses can be satisfied as well. Hence, according to the version of TDAP supposed here—with (ii') in place of (ii)—the hearer could be justified in accepting the speaker's testimony that her ticket is a loser. That is to say, the hearer could be justified in believing, prior to the drawing of the lottery, that the speaker's ticket is a loser. According to almost all who have thought about the so-called lottery paradox and related matters, this is a starkly counterintuitive conclusion.⁸ The argument leading up to it is easily blocked, of course: if the speaker's

² For a detailed statement of Fricker's brand of internalism, see her (2007); see also her (1987).

³ Suppose, for instance, Regina's colleague is instructing the people about eighteenth-century barn architecture by showing them around a carefully selected real eighteenth-century barn located in an area which contains mostly fake eighteenth-century barns. We may then assume that they will come to have many—and perhaps even only—justified true beliefs about eighteenth-century barn constructions, but not knowledge; see Stine (1976). (We are assuming here, with the mainstream, that there are Gettier situations, that is, situations in which a person has a justified true belief that does not amount to knowledge. If this assumption is false and knowledge is nothing over and above justified true belief, then, we believe, as will appear shortly, (ii) can be retained in its present form.)

⁴ See Fricker (2006b), p. 606.

⁵ Similarly, we would deny that there is any basis in our common understanding of the expression 'being competent with respect to a proposition' (if there is a common understanding of that phrase at all, as opposed to one of the word 'competent') for claiming that, because these people have only formed justified true beliefs in the propositions at issue, and not knowledge, they fail to be competent with respect to these propositions.

⁶ A possible objection to this claim, which can be distilled from Fricker (2006b), is that to trust a speaker's testimony is to trust her to *know* the content of her testimony because a speaker who does not know what she asserts has thereby violated the norm of assertion, according to which one must assert only what one knows, and this violation compromises her trustworthiness. But this objection will be found persuasive (if at all) only by those who accept the supposed norm of assertion (which has been defended by, among others, Williamson, 2000, Adler, 2002, and DeRose, 2002). Our own view is that justified credibility is enough to warrant assertion; see Douven (2006, 2009) for a defense of this.

⁷ See, e.g., Fricker (1995) and Adler (2006) for thorough discussions of this 'reductionism' issue. As far as we can see, nothing we say in this paper forces us to take sides in the reductionism debate.

⁸ See, among many others, Stalnaker (1984), Lehrer (1986), Pollock (1990), Ryan (1996), Evnine (1999), Nelkin (2000), Adler (2002), and Douven (2002).

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