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Title: How should we think about the testimony of others? Is it reducible to other kinds of evidence?
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In this essay I will argue that testimony is a basic source of knowledge that is not reducible to other kinds of evidence. This is the non-reductionist view, whereby a hearer is deemed to acquire knowledge automatically from the testimony she hears unless there are good reasons why the testimony or the testifier is unreliable. Reductionists, on the other hand, believe that in order to acquire knowledge from testimony the hearer must have positive reasons for accepting the testimony. These reasons are typically based on other sources of knowledge such as perception and induction; therefore testimony is said to be reducible to these other sources of knowledge. I will argue that non-reductionism is to be preferred as reductionism cannot account for the knowledge of young children.

The non-reductionist view provides an intuitive explanation of how children acquire knowledge from testimony. Children's experience of the world is limited. Some knowledge is acquired through sense data, but progress would be very slow if this were the only source of knowledge to be relied upon. This view originates from Thomas Reid:

“The wise author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon human testimony before we can give a reason for doing so. This, indeed, puts our judgments almost entirely in the power of those who are about us in the first period of life; but this is necessary both to our preservation and to our improvement. If children were so framed as to pay no regard to testimony or authority, they must, in the literal sense, perish for lack of knowledge.” (Reid 1983: 281–2)

It is not necessary to accept the idea of a God--given “propensity to rely upon human testimony”; it could also be explained in evolutionary terms (see, for example, Burge 1993: 446)
It is in accounting for a child’s knowledge that the non-reductionist seems to have a fundamental advantage. Children’s acquisition of knowledge via testimony poses a problem for both global and local reductionist views.

According to the global reductionist, before a hearer can accept any testimony as knowledge she must consider a significant number of instances of testimony given previously and compare these with the facts, i.e. how the world actually is, to determine whether testimony is in general reliable. Lackey (2008: 146) suggests that this process of extensive comparison required by the global reductionists seems implausible for adults. It is clearly beyond the cognitive abilities of young children.

Local reductionism does not fare any better than its global counterpart. Instead of determining whether testimony is a reliable source of knowledge in general, the local reductionist demands that the hearer decide for each particular instance of testimony whether the testifier and the testimony are to be trusted. Lackey (2006: 441) gives the example of an 18 month old who has been told by her parents that the stove is hot. If the stove is in fact hot, it seems reasonable to suggest that the child knows that the stove is hot. It does not seem reasonable to suggest, however, that the child has good reasons for believing her parents. Even if her parents have told her lots of things before and they have always been true, does a child of this age really have the cognitive ability to make the connection between past instances of true testimony and this current case? There are two possible conclusions to draw here: either we accept reductionism and accept that young children cannot have knowledge or we maintain that young children can have knowledge and reject reductionism.

A reductionist will be content to conclude that young children cannot have knowledge from testimony. If a child is incapable of forming good reasons to accept testimony then she cannot have knowledge. She has a true belief that the stove is hot but no justification for this belief. However, as Lackey points out, this seems to contradict our common sense view of young children’s knowledge. If a child has the linguistic capacity to understand the testimony and the stove is hot
it seems perfectly reasonable to say that the child in the example above has knowledge. The problem with this argument, however, is that it is based on our intuitions about knowledge. Although Lackey's intuition is in this case that the child has knowledge, a reductionist will most likely have the opposite intuition. This highlights a problem with using intuitions, especially the intuitions of philosophers with a vested interest in their own theory of knowledge, to form a reliable basis for an argument. Perhaps if we consulted people on the street they would confirm the common sense intuition that young children can have knowledge from testimony. However, different experiences with children and different views on what it is to know something suggest that we would be more likely to encounter a variety of intuitions.

The common sense intuition that young children can have knowledge from testimony might be strengthened if we can provide additional reasons for this view. One option is to consider differences in behaviour. If I know p I will act differently to if I merely believe p. If I know something is hot then I will not touch it. If I believe it is hot, I might tentatively put my hand close to it to test my belief. If we return to the stove example, we could argue that if the child does not touch the stove after receiving the testimony this is evidence that she has knowledge. Unfortunately there is no guarantee that behaviours will be consistent among mature individuals let alone young children. A further possibility for establishing whether an adult knows p is whether the adult is willing to testify that p. Even if this is a reliable indication of knowledge in adults, it seems unlikely to be so for children as there is no way to know whether they are simply repeating what they have been told.

Even if we concede that, in spite of our intuitions to the contrary, young children do not have knowledge, the reductionist is faced with a further challenge, namely explaining how and when children come to have knowledge later on. The obvious response is that children can have knowledge once they have the ability to reason inductively and thereby form good reasons for accepting testimony. However, this argument faces a regress problem. How do children learn to reason in this way if they have not previously accepted any testimony? In order
to know either that testimony in general or a particular testifier is reliable the child must use previous experience, where testimony has corresponded to the facts, but there will be a point when the child has no previous experience on which to draw. This is a fundamental problem for both local and global reductionists – neither can explain how we can begin to acquire knowledge from testimony without already having knowledge gained from testimony.

So far I have argued that if we accept the reductive view of testimony then children cannot have knowledge, but as children can have knowledge, or at the very least begin to acquire knowledge at some point, the reductive view must be false. However, does the non-‐reductive view really fare any better? Lackey (2008) argues that non-‐reductivists cannot account for the knowledge of young children either: “[if] infants and young children are cognitively incapable of having positive reasons, then so, too, are they incapable of having negative reasons.” (2008: 199). According to the non-‐reductionists, in order to acquire knowledge from testimony there must be no undefeated defeaters. Plantinga (2000: 361) defines a defeater as follows: “A defeater for a belief b … is another belief d such that, given my noetic structure, I cannot rationally hold b, given that I believe d.” For Lackey defeaters can be either psychological or normative. A psychological defeater is a doubt or belief held by the subject (the receiver of the testimony) that indicates that the belief that p is either false or unjustifed. A normative defeater is a doubt or belief that that subject ought to have that indicates that the speaker’s belief that p is either false or unjustified. For example, I have a friend who thinks it is funny to make people believe things that are not true. So, when he tells me that an episode of Bergerac was filmed in his house, this belief is defeated by my existing, more general belief that my friend is prone to telling lies for comedic effect. This is a psychological defeater. A few year’s ago another friend told me that he had a lot of redshanks in his garden. I believed his testimony, as I believed him to be a knowledgeable birdwatcher. However, this testimony did not constitute knowledge. I should have known that redshanks are waders, unlikely to be found in a hedge. My friend had seen redstarts. This is a normative defeater.
Lackey suggests that children, due to their cognitively immaturity, are unlikely to have developed their own psychological defeaters and are unlikely to be aware of normative defeaters. She argues that saying that children can satisfy the ‘no undefeated defeater’ condition necessary to acquire knowledge is equivalent to saying that a chair can satisfy a ‘no lying’ condition. It is impossible for a chair to lie and it is impossible for a child to have defeaters. The ‘no undefeated defeater’ condition is satisfied by young children, but it is satisfied trivially (see Lackey 2008: 197ff). Whereas reductionism is too strong, not allowing children to be justified in believing when they intuitively are, non-reductionism is too weak, allowing children to be justified in believing when they intuitively are not (Lackey 2008: 200).

Goldberg (2008) provides a response to Lackey’s defeater problem. He accepts that young children are too trusting to be considered reliable epistemic agents. However, they are (almost) always in the presence of a caregiver who can help them determine which pieces of testimony are reliable. Caregivers provide the necessary defeaters to prevent children obtaining knowledge too easily. Under adult supervision, then, young children are reliable receivers of testimony and therefore can have knowledge. Although it seems sensible to assume that caregivers will try to prevent their children from forming false beliefs and help them to learn how to recognise unreliable testifiers, the role Goldberg ascribes to them seems too strong. First, there are going to be many times when the caregiver is not present or does not hear the testimony offered to the child. Secondly there may be cases where the caregiver simply chooses not to intervene. Thirdly, the amount and quality of epistemic supervision provided is likely to vary from child to child.

Goldberg (2008: 26) argues that as well as providing defeaters to prevent children from obtaining knowledge too easily, caregivers can prevent children from acquiring knowledge that they otherwise would have been justified in acquiring. In his example a child’s Mother sees Father take the milk out of the fridge. She knows that he tends to selfishly finish the milk and return the empty carton to the fridge. A third adult, Liz, tells the child that there is milk in the
fridge. Mother hears the testimony and assumes Liz did not see Father finish the milk. If Mother does not intervene on the child’s behalf here, Goldberg argues, then the no relevant defeater condition has not been satisfied and so the child will not have knowledge. Even if, unbeknownst to Mother, Liz saw that the father did in fact put the milk back into the fridge untouched, and her testimony is reliable, the child will still not have knowledge. This does not seem right. If an adult who is reliable has told the child that there is milk in the fridge and there is milk in the fridge then the child knows there is milk in the fridge. Again, it seems that Goldberg gives the caregiver too much power.

An alternative response to Lackey might be to question the concept of ‘defeater’. Lackey defines normative defeaters as beliefs that the speaker should have. Who determines what beliefs a speaker should have? If we take the bird watching example above, why should I have known that redshanks were waders? How do we determine which propositions fall within the set of normative defeaters and which are outside of it? The set of normative defeaters could be the set of all true propositions, but this will lead to universal scepticism as we could find a defeater to defeat any belief. For example Descartes’ sceptical argument that you do not know for sure that you are not dreaming will defeat any knowledge of the external world. If we want to avoid scepticism we must draw a line, but where should we draw it? Normative defeaters can be seen as reflecting the common knowledge of a community, but this still does not specify how we decide what is in or out. Perhaps the term ‘defeater’ is vague. There are some propositions we can clearly exclude from the set, e.g. sceptical arguments, some we must include and a lot of borderline cases. If ‘defeater’ is vague, then ‘knowledge’ must also be vague, as any knowledge that may be defeated by a borderline defeater will be a borderline case of knowledge.

Lackey’s main criticism of non-reductionism seems to be that children are unreliable because they do not have enough existing knowledge to form defeaters. This raises similar questions to the reductionist view of testimony I argued against above. First, at what point do children have enough background knowledge to form defeaters? The common or background knowledge that
constitutes defeaters is built up throughout our lives. We might equally argue that a thirty year old cannot have knowledge compared with a sixty year old as the thirty year old has significantly fewer available defeaters. Secondly, how do children acquire the knowledge needed to form defeaters if they cannot rely on testimony? Non-reductivism, as described by Lackey, faces the same regress problem as the reductive view of testimony. In order to be able to evaluate either positive reasons for accepting testimony or negative reasons for rejecting it children must have some existing knowledge to work with. Specifically they must have some experience of what constitutes reliable or unreliable testimony from which they can reason inductively. It seems if we accept the claim that children need to be able to form either positive or negative reasons before they can accept testimony, not only is it impossible for young children to have knowledge, but it is also impossible for children to ever begin to have knowledge.

In this essay I have argued that testimony is not reducible to other kinds of evidence. The reductive view is problematic as it entails that young children cannot have knowledge, which intuitively they can. Lackey (2008) argues that the non-reductive view faces the same problem as children cannot reliably recognise defeaters. Having rejected Goldberg’s response to Lackey I argue instead that the concept of defeater needs to be reconsidered. The fundamental problem for both the reductive view of testimony and Lackey’s interpretation of the non-reductive view is that of regress. In order to form reasons for accepting or rejecting testimony children need experience of testimony from which they can reason inductively. The simplest way to avoid this regress is to allow young children to acquire knowledge freely from testimony whenever they come to hold a true belief obtained from an objectively reliable testifier. Taking an externalist position with regards to testimonial justification allows children to gain knowledge from testimony without an existing base of knowledge. We can retain the idea that testimony is a source of knowledge in its own right, not reducible to other sources, yet it can be regulated by external factors to prevent knowledge being obtained too easily.
References