

# TESTIMONIAL WARRANT: A PLURALISTIC APPROACH

Domingos Faria  
FLUL | LanCog  
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# INTRODUCTION

## Facts:

Most of our beliefs, including religious beliefs, are learned from the spoken or written word of others. So, *testimony* is responsible for much of our beliefs.

## Problems:

Are those testimonial beliefs warranted?

- “*Warrant*” is here understood as being necessary and, when added to true belief, sufficient (or close to sufficient) for knowledge.

What precisely is needed in order for a hearer to acquire warranted beliefs from the spoken or written word of others?

What is required for a testimonial belief be warranted? How can hearers acquire warranted beliefs from the testimony of speakers?

# MY MAIN GOALS:

- ...to argue that the two dominant views on testimonial warrant, namely reductionism and non-reductionism, face serious objections. On the one hand, if reductionism is an adequate account, testimonial warrant will be too hard for some cases; but, on the other hand, if non-reductionism is an adequate account, then testimonial warrant will be too easy for other cases.
- Based on such problems, I will show that not all cases of testimonial warrant are epistemically homogeneous nor should they get the same treatment.
- So, instead of a *unified account* of testimonial warrant, I will explore a *pluralistic account*, following Edward Craig (1990) and John Greco (2015), in which there are at least two kinds of testimonial warrant: one in which testimony works as an acquisition source and another in which testimony works as a distribution mechanism.
- Finally, I will survey some consequences that this new account of testimonial warrant may have for religious beliefs based on testimony.

# MY PLAN:

1. Accounts of Testimonial Warrant: unified vs pluralistic.
2. Unified Accounts of Testimonial Warrant: reductionism vs non-reductionism.
3. A Dilemma for Unified Accounts of Testimonial Warrant.
4. A Pluralistic Account of Testimonial Warrant.
5. Some Consequences for Religious Beliefs.

# 1. ACCOUNTS OF TESTIMONIAL WARRANT: UNIFIED VS PLURALISTIC

# 1.THESES ON TESTIMONIAL WARRANT

Two theses on testimonial warrant:

**(UA)** *Unified account of testimonial warrant* =<sub>df</sub> it is an account of testimonial warrant which holds the following thesis: that (1) all cases of testimonial warrant are epistemically homogeneous and (2) lend themselves to the same theoretical treatment.

**(PA)** *Pluralistic account of testimonial warrant* =<sub>df</sub> it is an account of testimonial warrant which holds the following thesis: that (1') all cases of testimonial warrant are epistemically heterogeneous and (2') lend themselves to different theoretical treatments.

Traditionally it is implicitly stated that **(UA)** thesis is the correct view. For example, reductionism and non-reductionism are two dominant views of testimonial warrant which presuppose the **(UA)** thesis. However, I want to hold that **(PA)** thesis is more plausible than **(UA)** thesis. But first we want to characterize reductionist and non-reductionist approaches.

## 2. UNIFIED ACCOUNTS OF TESTIMONIAL WARRANT: REDUCTIONISM VS NON-REDUCTIONISM

## 2.1.1. REDUCTIONISM'S CHARACTERIZATION

According to **reductionism** the epistemic status of testimony is ultimately reducible to sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.

Contemporary proponents of reductionism include Elizabeth Fricker (2006), Keith Lehrer (2006), Duncan Pritchard (2008), etc. But the historical roots of reductionism are typically traced to the work of **David Hume**.

- “There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. (...) The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connection, which we perceive a priori, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a *conformity* between them”. [Cf. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 74].



## 2.1.1. REDUCTIONISM'S CHARACTERIZATION

- According to a Humean view, hearers must observe a *constant* and regular *conformity* between the reports of speakers and the corresponding facts in order to accept testimony with warrant.
- For example, a person S1 may perceive a constant conformity between the instances of a person S2's testimony and reality and, on this basis, inductively conclude that S2 is a generally reliable epistemic source.

So, according to reductionism, hearers must possess non-testimonially based positive reasons in order to be warranted in accepting the testimony of speakers. And these reasons are the result of an *inductive inference*.

- For example: hearers observe a general conformity between reports and the corresponding facts and, with the assistance of memory and reason, they inductively infer that certain speakers, contexts, or types of reports are reliable sources of information.

## 2.1.1. REDUCTIONISM'S CHARACTERIZATION

In this way, the warrant of testimony is *reduced* to the warrant for sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.

Thus, we can formulate the *reductionist thesis* as follows:

**(R)** For every speaker S and hearer H, H believes that p with warrant on the basis of S's testimony if and only if H has sufficiently good non-testimonial positive reasons to accept S's testimony. So, testimonial warrant is *reduced* to perceptual, memorial, and inferential warrant.

## 2.1.2. REDUCTIONISM'S PROBLEMS

The main problem of reductionism is that it seems **too demanding**.

It can be argued that young children clearly acquire a great deal of knowledge or warrant from their parents and teachers and yet it is said to be doubtful that they possess non-testimonially based positive reasons (such as an inferential induction) for accepting much of what they told. (see Audi 1997).

- For example, a young child might come to have warrant that the milk is in the refrigerator from the testimony of her mother, but it is unclear whether she has the cognitive sophistication to make an inferential induction or to have reasons for believing that her mother is a reliable source of information or that testimony is generally reliable.
- Given this, reductionists might have difficulty to explain how such small children could acquire all of testimonial warrant they at least seem to possess.

## 2.1.2. REDUCTIONISM'S PROBLEMS

Reductionism entail overly skeptical results:

- The sort of inductive evidence that reductionism requires is typically unavailable to the hearer. If testimonial warrant requires such evidence, then this sort of warrant will be scarce. But this is an unacceptable result.
- In short, if testimonial warrant requires non-testimonially based positive reasons on the part of the hearer, then **testimonial warrant seems too hard**.

## 2.2.1. NON-REDUCTIONISM'S CHARACTERIZATION

According to non-reductionism, testimonial warrant is an *irreducible* epistemic source. So, the epistemic status of testimony is not reducible to sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.

Contemporary proponents of non-reductionism include Alvin Plantinga (1993), Michael Dummett (1994), Ernest Sosa (2006), etc. But the historical roots of non-reductionism are typically traced to the work of *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. (...) I believed by instinct whatever they [my parents and tutors] told me, long before I had the idea of a lie, or a thought of the possibility of their deceiving me. Afterwards, upon reflection, I found they had acted like fair and honest people, who wished me well. I found that, if I had not believed what they told me, before I could give a reason for my belief, I had to this day been little better than a changeling”. [cf. Reid, *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p.281-282].

## 2.2.1. NON-REDUCTIONISM'S CHARACTERIZATION

So, according to Reid, accepting the testimony of others could not require having non-testimonially grounded positive reasons, since we must all rely on the reports of our parents and caretakers long before we possess any evidence regarding their reliability.

Thus, according to non-reductionism, testimony is a basic source of warrant, on an epistemic par with sense perception, memory, inference, and so on.

But, more recent accounts of non-reductionism add to Reid's characterization that, though the presence of positive reasons is not necessary to acquire testimonial warrant, the absence of negative reasons is. This condition is included to prevent doxastic irrationality or irresponsibility on testimonial warrant.

## 2.2.1. NON-REDUCTIONISM'S CHARACTERIZATION

In this way, non-reductionists maintain that, so as long as there are no undefeated defeaters, hearers can be warranted in accepting what they are told merely on the basis of testimony of speakers. So, the main idea is that so long as there is no available evidence against accepting a speaker's report, the hearer has no positive epistemic work to do in order to accept the testimony in question.

Thus, we can formulate the *non-reductionist thesis* as follows:

**(NR)** For every speaker S and hearer H, H believes that p with warrant on the basis of S's testimony if and only if H has no undefeated defeater for S's testimony.

## 2.2.2. NON-REDUCTIONISM'S PROBLEMS

The main problem of non-reductionism is that it seems **too tolerant**.

Non-reductionists commit themselves to saying that testimonial warrant can be acquired in the complete absence of any relevant positive reasons on the part of the hearer; nevertheless, this is said to **permit gullibility, epistemic irrationality, and intellectual irresponsibility**. (see Fricker 1995, Faulkner 2002).

In particular, since hearers can acquire testimonially warranted beliefs in the complete absence of any relevant positive reasons, we can say that randomly selected speakers, arbitrarily chosen posting on the internet, etc, can be trusted, so long as there is no negative evidence against such sources.



## 2.2.2. NON-REDUCTIONISM'S PROBLEMS

In short, if testimonial warrant does not require non-testimonially based positive reasons on the part of the hearer, then **testimonial warrant seems too easy**.

Thus, the two dominant views of the epistemic status of testimonial beliefs, which presuppose (UA) thesis, are susceptible to serious problems.

# 3. A DILEMMA FOR UNIFIED ACCOUNTS OF TESTIMONIAL WARRANT

## 3.A DILEMMA FOR UNIFIED ACCOUNTS

In this section, I want to show that a single or unified account of testimonial warrant for all the cases seems unavailable. So, **(UA) thesis seems implausible.**

In order to show this, consider the following dilemma:

- (1) An adequate account of testimonial warrant for all cases requires good inductive inference on the part of the hearer (as asserted by reductionism) or it does not require such inductive inference (as asserted by non-reductionism).
- (2) If it requires good inductive inference, then testimonial warrant is too hard; because there will be cases not counted as warrant that should be.
- (3) If it does not require good inductive inference, then testimonial warrant is too easy; because there will be cases counted as warrant that should not be.
- (4) Therefore, an adequate account of testimonial warrant for all cases seems implausible; because a given account must make testimonial warrant either too easy for some cases or too hard for other cases.

## 3.A DILEMMA FOR UNIFIED ACCOUNTS

This dilemma is also inspired by a consideration of cases in which different cases pull our intuitions in different directions.

When we look at different examples of testimonial warrant, we see that some suggest a reductionist approach, whereas others suggest a non-reductionist approach:

**(C1)** A police officer asks a suspect whether he was at the scene of the crime, and the suspect tells him no.

**(C2)** A visitor to an unfamiliar city asks directions from a stranger. (For example, where is the train station?). He tells that the train station is down the street.

**(C3)** A mother tells her small child that there is milk in the refrigerator.

# 3.A DILEMMA FOR UNIFIED ACCOUNTS

## Our intuitions:

- In **(C1)**, it seems that testimonial warrant requires good inductive reasons. It seems that the hearer must use something like inductive inference to judge whether the speaker is telling the truth. So, in this case, the police officer should not just believe whatever the suspect says. On the contrary, the police officer should employ skills learned over a career to discern what is and is not believable.
- In **(C3)**, it is less plausible that testimonial warrant requires good inductive reasons. On the contrary, it is more plausible that the hearer can believe straightaway what he is told. In other words, in this case it makes sense that the parent “transmits” his warrant to his child and without anything like inductive reasoning on the hearer’s part required. Likewise, it is plausible that something epistemically special is going on in this **(C3)**: namely, testimonial warrant seems to depend more on the relationship between speaker and hearer than on the inductive inference.
- **(C2)** seems somewhere in between. On the one hand, there is little reason to think that the testifier might be uncooperative. On the other hand, we might be looking for signs of competence and depending on these.

## 3.A DILEMMA FOR UNIFIED ACCOUNTS

This indicates problems with a unified account of testimonial warrant:

- Different cases of testimony seem to place very different demands on the hearers.
- Some cases suggest a necessary condition on testimonial warrant: that the hearer need good inductive inference in order to have warrant.
- But other cases suggest that no such condition applies. Instead, they suggest that testimonial warrant is a distinctively social phenomenon that involves an appropriate relationship between speaker and hearer.
- Therefore, a single or unified account of testimonial warrant for all the cases seems unavailable.

# 3.A DILEMMA FOR UNIFIED ACCOUNTS

## In sum:

- The epistemology of testimony does not seem able to handle all cases in the same way.
- Thus, not all cases of testimonial warrant should get the same treatment. This is because some cases of belief based on testimony require one sort of epistemological treatment, while other cases require a different treatment. If that is so, then a unified account of testimonial warrant is not plausible.
- For that reason, I think that we need a *pluralistic account* of testimonial warrant.

# 4. A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT OF TESTIMONIAL WARRANT



## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

In the last section, we saw that not all testimonial cases should be handled the same way. It seems that testimonial warrant does not make up a single epistemic kind. So, given the range or extension of different cases of testimony, we might say that testimonial warrant is not homogeneous. If this is correct, then it seems that (PA) thesis is more plausible than (UA) thesis.

Now, I want to explore and develop a version of **(PA) thesis**, inspired by the work of Edward Craig (1990: 11) and John Greco (2015: 285-286). In order to do that, we can begin to explore the notion of epistemic community:

- Roughly, we can define *epistemic community* as a collection of cognitive agents in various relations of epistemic cooperation and epistemic dependence, aiming to share some relevant information each other.

## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

- Each of us is a member of several epistemic communities because, since we are social creatures, we have a great need for quality information and we greatly need each other to get it.

- Examples of epistemic communities are scientific teams, universities, schools, corporations, governments, families, circle of friends, and so on. So, all of these epistemic communities involve collections of persons cooperating in order to share quality information.

- Now, if this is broadly correct, then the sharing of quality information within an epistemic community involves two kinds of activities:

**(1) Acquisition activities** – there are activities that originally get information into the community by means of reliable uptake. (I.e. activities concerned with getting information into the social system in the first place).

**(2) Distribution activities** – there are activities that reliably transmit true information, or warranted belief, from one person to another. (I.e. mechanisms for distributing information that is already in the community).

## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

- Thus, in any epistemic community, there are mechanisms that get information into the system in the first place, and mechanisms that keep the information flowing.
- Furthermore, it is reasonable that the norms governing (1) should be different from the norms governing (2).
- This is because the dominant concern governing (1) is to employ quality control so as to admit only high quality information into the community, whereas the dominant concern governing (2) is to make high quality information already in the community available, in an *easily* and *efficiently* way, to those who need it.
- Thus, it is plausible that the norms governing (1) are more demanding than the norms governing (2).

## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

Corresponding to these two kinds of activities, we can also distinguish between two roles that testimonial warrant plays:

**(1') Testimonial *acquisition* of warrant** – One in which testimony works as an acquisition source (alongside perception, reason, and other familiar acquisitioning sources). In this case, testimonial warrant reduces to other kinds of warrant.

**(2') Testimonial *distribution* of warrant** – One in which testimony works as a distributing mechanism. In this case, testimonial warrant is distinctive and requires a distinctive treatment.

## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

- So, for example, testimonial warrant sometimes requires inductive inference on the part of the hearer when testimony works as an acquisition source of warrant, functioning so as to admit information into a relevant community for the first place, as it does in **(C1)**. In these cases, the hearer has testimonial warrant by exercising his good inductive reasoning.
- However, in other circumstances, testimony may work so as to distribute warrant throughout the relevant community, and do so without requiring inductive inference on the part of the hearer, as it does in **(C3)**. In these cases, the hearer, when is in appropriate circumstances, can believe straightway what the speaker tells him. So, in this distributing role, the conditions for testimonial warrant need not be so demanding.
- This explains why testimonial warrant requires more on the part of the hearer in some cases, and less in others. For, different norms govern the different kinds of testimony, some of which are at the service of information acquisition for first use in an epistemic community and others are at the service of information distribution within an epistemic community.

## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

**Problem:** when does testimony properly works as (1') and when does it properly works as (2')?

Typically, testimony properly works in its distributing role, in the transmission of warrant, only by means of relevant social mechanisms (such as familiar and friendship relations, social norms, institutional rules, etc).

For example:

- In (C1) there is no social mechanism in place to underwrite a reliable transfer of reliable information; i.e., there is no social relationship between speaker and hearer that would underwrite such a transfer - so, in such case, the epistemic environment is not suitable for the distribution function.
- But, in (C3) it seems obvious that there are social institutions and relationships in place that underwrite reliable transfers of information - thus, in such case, the epistemic environment is suitable for the distribution function.

## 4.A PLURALISTIC ACCOUNT

In sum, three ideas of our pluralistic account:

1. It makes sense that, within an epistemic community, there are activities concerning to **acquisition** and **distribution** of information.
2. It also makes sense that testimonial warrant, within epistemic community, sometimes serve an **acquisition function** and sometimes a **distribution function**.
3. This is an approach that allows an *epistemic division of labor* and an *epistemic dependence* which is necessary to account for all the knowledge and warranted beliefs that we have.

# 5. SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS



# 5. SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In the final part of this talk I want to survey some consequences that this pluralistic approach of testimonial warrant may have for religious beliefs based on testimony.

**Question:** How should religious testimony be treated?

- A consequence of this pluralistic approach of testimonial warrant would be to treat religious testimony, at least sometimes, as having a distributing function, in which the hearer or receiver of testimony might arrive at warranted religious beliefs by means of his location in an epistemic religious community.
- Such location, which allows testimonial warrant distribution, might be supported by relevant social mechanisms. For example, typically, some familiar and friendship relations, as well as religious institutions, are organized so as to produce religious testimony in various contexts.

# 5. SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

- **The main point:** if some people have warranted religious beliefs within an epistemic religious community, then they can transmit or distribute such beliefs with warrant for other people in such community. In this case, the hearers need not to have good inductive inference in order to be warranted on religious beliefs - so, they might have warranted religious beliefs in a *properly basic way*.
- However, it is important to underline that *warrant* cannot be transmitted from speaker to hearer if the speaker does not have warrant in the first place.
- So, first, within such epistemic community, there need to be *acquisition sources* of warrant for religious beliefs. (For example, it might be necessary to work on natural theology trying to find good arguments for God existence or, instead, we must have other source of acquisition).
- Thus, the testimonial distribution of warranted religious beliefs depends on the existence and the extent of acquisition sources of religious warrant.

**THANKS**

Domingos Faria  
FLUL | LanCog