

Introduction to Social Epistemology

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Outline

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The Epistemology of testimony

The novice/expert problem

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Social epistemology versus traditional epistemology

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- ▶ Traditional epistemologists rarely present their deliberations as critical to the practical problems of life ... ;
- ▶ Skeptical problems themselves are really distant from everyday practical concerns.

Social epistemology versus traditional epistemology

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- ▶ Social epistemology addresses some issues of practical importance, such as the problem of **testimony** and the **novices/experts**.

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Related Issues: the epistemology of testimony

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- ▶ If so, why so?
- ▶ If we are justified, what makes us justified?

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The Epistemology of testimony

Reductionism versus non reductionism

Liberalism versus conservatism

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- ▶ The earliest clear statements of these positions appear in David Hume and Thomas Reid.

Hume on reductionism

There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and more necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. . . . Our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. (Hume 1748, section X, at 74.)

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Reductionism about epistemology

- ▶ Hume's picture is that we properly form beliefs based on testimony only because we have seen other confirmed instances.
- ▶ Testimonially-based justification is therefore reducible to a combination of perceptually-, memorially-, and inferentially-based justification.
- ▶ But is it plausible that we are justified in accepting testimony in virtue of past confirmed instances?

Objection to reductionism

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- ▶ It seems that they properly trust others even when they lack any past inductive basis in their experience:

Objection to reductionism

If credulity were the effect of reasoning and experience, it must grow up and gather strength, in the same proportion as reason and experience do. But, if it is the gift of Nature, it will be strongest in childhood, and limited and restrained by experience; and the most superficial view of human nature shews, that the last is really the case, and not the first. ... Nature intends that our belief should be guided by the authority and reason of others before it can be guided by our own reason. (Reid 1764, chapter 6, section 24, at 96.)

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- ▶ Reid suggests that we have an innate faculty, unconfirmed by personally-observed earlier instances, which properly causes us to trust those who testify.
- ▶ Testimonially-based justification flows from the reliability of this faculty, and so it is not reducible to perceptually- and inferentially-based justification.

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- ▶ Another way to characterize disputes over testimonially-based beliefs is to ask to what extent testimonially-based justification is analogous to perceptually-based justification.
- ▶ The Humean-reductionist tradition sees strong disanalogies, while the Reidian-non-reductionist tradition sees a strong analogy between the sources.

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- ▶ Conservatives are more demanding and dispense testimonially-based epistemic honors more conservatively.

Liberalism: The 'blind trust' position

- ▶ Some people (Burge, Foley) think that the bare assertion of a claim by a speaker gives the hearer a prima facie reason to accept it, quite independently of anything the hearer might know or justifiably believe about the speaker's abilities, circumstances and opportunity to have acquired that piece of information.

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- ▶ According to this position, one is “prima facie” entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to.

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- ▶ Foley and Burge are interested in the *prima facie* part.

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- ▶ Just like there is a prima facie justification in believing what we see, similarly we are prima facie justified in accepting information through testimony.
- ▶ But many disagree that we should be as liberal about testimony justification as we are about perceptual justification.

Testimony versus perception

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- ▶ Fake objects, for instance, can be the result of deception, and perceptual-based beliefs about fake objects can obviously go awry because of the influence of agency on a perceptual environment.
- ▶ If the possibility of deception is a good reason to think that S requires positive reasons to believe T, then there seems to be equally strong reason to require that S have positive reasons to believe that the objects of her perceptually-based beliefs are genuine.

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- ▶ However, this seems clearly untrue as a conceptual matter; it is at least possible for your informant to be a reliable robot lacking freedom.
- ▶ And even among common human experience, there are cases where people lack the time to deliberate about deception; human free human action is not always at stake in testimonially-based belief.

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Alvin Goldman

Cast of Characters



- ▶ Ph.D., Princeton 1965
- ▶ Board of Governors Professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
- ▶ Author of 12 books, including *A Theory of Human Action* (1977), *Epistemology and Cognition* (1986); and *Knowledge in a Social World* (1999).
- ▶ Basically the founding father of social epistemology in contemporary times.

The problem of the novices/experts

quite pressing. That holds of the problem to be discussed here: how laypersons should evaluate the testimony of experts and decide which of two or more rival experts is most credible. It is of practical importance because in a complex, highly specialized world people are constantly confronted with situations in which, as comparative novices (or even ignoramuses), they must turn to putative experts for intellectual guidance or assistance. It is of theoretical interest because the appropriate epistemic considerations are far from transparent; and it is not clear how far the problems lead to insurmountable skeptical quandaries. This paper does not argue for flat-out skepticism in this

Goldman's focus

ist or inductivist position. Of greater concern to me is the recognition that a hearer's evidence about a source's reliability or unreliability can often *bolster* or *defeat* the hearer's justifiedness in accepting testimony from that source. This can be illustrated with two examples.

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First example: mathematical claims

As you pass someone on the street, he assertively utters a sophisticated mathematical proposition, which you understand but have never previously assessed for plausibility. Are you justified in accepting it from this stranger? Surely it depends partly on whether the speaker turns out to be a mathematics professor of your acquaintance or, say, a nine-year-old child. You have prior evidence for thinking that the former is in a position to know such a proposition, whereas the latter is not. Whether or not there is an a priori principle of default entitlement of the sort endorsed by Burge and Foley, your empirical evidence about the identity of the speaker is clearly relevant. I do not claim that Burge and Foley (etc.) cannot handle these cases. They might say that your recognition that the speaker is a math professor *bolsters* your *overall* entitlement to accept the proposition (though not your *prima facie* entitlement); recognizing that it is a child *defeats* your *prima facie* entitlement to accept the proposition. My point is, however, that your evidence about the

Second example: cars colors

accept the speaker's assertion. A similar point holds in the following example. As you relax behind the wheel of your parked car, with your eyes closed, you hear someone nearby describing the make and color of the passing cars. Plausibly, you have prima facie justification in accepting those descriptions as true, whether this prima facie entitlement has an a priori or inductivist basis. But if you then open your eyes and discover that the speaker is himself blindfolded and not even looking in the direction of the passing traffic, this prima facie justification is certainly defeated. So what you empirically determine about a speaker can make a massive difference to your overall justifiedness in accepting his utterances.

Conclusion

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- ▶ The hearer's evidence about the reliability of the speaker can defeat or bolster his justification in accepting the testimony.
- ▶ What kind of evidence should one have in choosing between experts?

The novice problem

So the question is: Can novices, while remaining novices, make justified judgments about the relative credibility of rival experts? When and how is this possible?

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The novice problem

- ▶ In the problem at issue, the novice is not in a position to evaluate the target experts by using his own opinion;
- ▶ Or the novice does not have enough confidence in his opinions in this domain to use them in adjudicating or evaluating the disagreement between the rival experts.
- ▶ He thinks of the domain as properly requiring a certain expertise, and he does not view himself as possessing this expertise

The analogy with the listener/eye-witness problem

between conflicting experts' judgments or reports.

We can clarify the nature of the novice/expert problem by comparing it to the analogous listener/eyewitness problem. (Indeed, if we use the term "expert" loosely, the latter problem may just be a species of the novice/expert problem.) Two putative eyewitnesses claim to have witnessed a certain crime. A listener—for example, a juror—did not himself witness the crime, and has no prior beliefs about who committed it or how it was committed. In other words, he has no personal knowledge of the event. He wants to learn what transpired by listening to the testimonies of the eyewitnesses. The question is how he should adjudicate between their testimonies if and when they conflict. In this case, the E-domain is the domain of propositions concerning the actions and circumstances involved in the crime. This E-domain is what the listener (the "novice") has no prior opinions about, or no opinions to which he feels he can legitimately appeal. (He regards his opinions, if any, as mere speculation, hunch, or what have you.)

It may be possible, at least in principle, for a listener to make a reason-

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- ▶ Can you think of possible counterexamples?

The novice/two experts problem

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- ▶ Is there any way for him to choose (justifiably) between two putative experts?
- ▶ If he could decide who is the greater authority, he could use this information to decide whom to trust.
- ▶ But how can someone who lacks knowledge about the domain justifiably choose between two self-proclaimed experts?

The nature of the problem: assigning authority to Y

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- ▶ If X wishes to decide how much authority to ascribe to Y with respect to domain D, X should ascertain what opinions Y has expressed about D on which X has independent opinions.
- ▶ Then X should assign Y a degree of authority proportional to the truth-ratio of Y’s D-related statements as judged by X’s own opinions.

An hard problem

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- ▶ Goldman considers several methods the novice might try to use.

Possible solutions?

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- ▶ Another is to solicit judgments from other (meta-)experts about the comparative expertise of the two contenders.
- ▶ A third is to investigate the opinions of additional experts, to see which position has more adherents.

Problems

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Problems

- ▶ There are tricky theoretical questions in each case, however, about the quality of evidence that a novice could obtain via these methods.
- ▶ How much can the novice be illuminated by hearing a debate on a topic on which his own ignorance precludes him from judging the correctness of the various premises?
- ▶ How can the novice assess the relative trustworthiness of the third parties who assess the original experts? Their trustworthiness may be as problematic as that of the initial experts.

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- ▶ Finally, does a viewpoint with more adherents always deserve greater credence than its negation?
- ▶ Agreement can arise from many factors, not all of which warrant increases in credence.
- ▶ Maybe the people who adhere to a certain view are just slavish followers of a charismatic but fundamentally confused or misguided leader.