

## Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

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**Article/Essay Title:** “Knowing from Testimony”

**Author:** Jennifer Lackey

**Readability:** Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

**Thesis:** Testimony is an important source of knowledge. Two important questions about the epistemology of testimony are: is testimonial knowledge acquired only by being *transmitted* from speaker to hearer? And, must a hearer have *positive reasons* to justifiably accept a speaker’s testimony? Lackey explains and explores both these questions.

### Key Definitions:

Testimony: often understood broadly as “tellings generally” (from Elizabeth Fricker); “people telling us things” (Robert Audi); and “a statement of someone’s thoughts or beliefs, which they might direct to the world at large and to no one in particular” (from Ernest Sosa) (p.433)

Testimonially-based knowledge: “a hearer form[s] a given belief *on the basis of the content of a speaker’s testimony*” (433)

Transmission of epistemic properties: “a testimonial exchange involves a speaker’s belief, along with the epistemic properties it possesses, being *transmitted* to a hearer” (434).

Defeaters: a doubt or belief that undermines or disqualifies the justification/warrant of S’s belief that *p*. Can itself be defeated by some other doubts or beliefs or reasons.

Undefeated defeater: “When one has a defeater *d* for one’s belief that *p* that is not itself defeated” (439); incompatible with testimonial knowledge.

### Brief Summary:

Testimony can be a source of knowledge if the hearer forms a belief on the basis of the *content* of the testimony, not some other feature of the testimony.

The transmission of epistemic properties (TEP) thesis states that “a testimonial exchange involves a speaker’s belief, along with the epistemic properties it possesses, being *transmitted* to a hearer” (434).

Two dimensions to the TEP: a necessity thesis and a sufficiency thesis (434)

- Necessity thesis (TEP-N): For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B’s belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted) on the basis of A’s testimony that *p* only if A’s belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted).
  - o Also glossed as “the thesis that speaker knowledge (justification, warrant) is a necessary condition for testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant)” (434).
- Sufficiency thesis (TEP-S): For every speaker, A, and hearer B, if (a) A’s belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted), (2) B comes to believe that *p* on the basis of the content of

A's testimony that *p*, and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that *p*, then B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted).

- Also glossed as “the thesis that, in the absence of undefeated defeaters, speaker knowledge (justification, warrant) is sufficient for testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant)” (435).

#### Counterexamples to TEP-N

- Type one: “speakers who fail to believe, and hence know, a proposition to which they are testifying, but nevertheless reliably convey the information in question through their testimony” (434)
  - Example: the creationist elementary school teacher who teaches evolution
    - “an *unreliable believer* may nonetheless be a *reliable testifier*, and so may reliably convey knowledge...to a hearer despite the fact that she fails to possess it herself” (435)
- Type two: “speakers who have an undefeated defeater for believing a proposition to which they are testifying, but manage reliably to convey the proposition through their testimony without transmitting the defeater in question to their hearers” (435)
  - Example: Barth goes to the eye doctor who tells him that his eyes are bad, but Bart doesn't believe him. Turns out the eye doctor is wrong, but his diagnosis serves as an “undefeated defeater.” Later Bart sees a car accident, and reports the accident to Iris.
    - “defeaters do not automatically ‘come along for the ride’ when a speaker offers testimony to a hearer...even though it is irrational for Bartholomew to trust his visual experiences in the face of the optometrist's testimony, such irrationality is not transferred to Iris via his testimony. This enables Bartholomew to impart knowledge...to her that he fails to possess himself” (435)

#### Counterexamples to TEP-S

- Type one: “for reasons having to do specifically with the *hearer*, a hearer's belief may fail to be known (justified, warranted) even though there are no relevant undefeated defeaters and the speaker from whom it was acquired has the knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) in question” (436)
  - Example: Sam is romantically obsessed with Pam and trusts everything she says. Pam said she saw a blue heron and he believed her. She is a reliable person, but even if she wasn't and even if it was super unlikely she saw a blue heron, Sam would believe her.
    - “while a speaker may be both a perfectly reliable believer and testifier, a *hearer may be so constituted as to prevent the epistemic properties of a speaker's belief from being transmitted to her*” (436); Sam is *incapable* of being sensitive to the defeaters at play when it comes to Pam
- Type two: “for reasons having to do specifically with the *speaker*, a hearer's belief may fail to be known (justified, warranted) even though there are no relevant undefeated defeaters and the speaker from whom it was acquired has the knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) in question” (436)
  - Example: Mary tells Larry that she has seen an orca. They are old friends and Larry has good reason to trust her, and he does. But Mary is trying to get her whale watching business going and so would have told him she saw an orca even

if she didn't. And it is also really surprising for her to have seen an orca at this time of year.

- “a *reliable believer* may nonetheless be an *unreliable testifier*” (437); “there are nearby possible worlds in which an orca whale was not in the relevant body of water, Mary nonetheless reports that there was one, and Larry...readily forms the corresponding belief on the basis of Mary's testimony” (437); “Larry's belief about there having been an orca whale in the relevant body of water is *counterfactually insensitive to the truth*” (437)

Solution: focus on the statements of speakers, rather than their states of belief or knowledge.

- Ditch TEP-N for *Reliability of the Statement-Necessity* thesis (RS-N): For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted) on the basis of A's testimony that *p* only if A's statement that *p* is reliable to otherwise truth-conducive” (437)
  - o Can flesh out this reliability condition in different ways: ex. sensitive, safe, etc
  - o “the central point of RS-N...is that the speaker's states of believing and knowing are epistemically relevant only insofar as they bear on her capacity to be a competent testifier” (438)
- Also need the Statement View of Testimony (SVT): For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that *p* is known (justified, warranted) on the basis of A's testimony that *p* only if (1) A's statement that *p* is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, (2) B comes to believe that *p* on the basis of the content of A's statement that *p*, and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that *p*. (438)

Reductionism and non-reductionism: “what precisely is needed in order for a hearer to be justified in accepting the testimony of a speaker?” (438)

- Non-reductionists say: “testimony is *just as basic* a source of justification (warrant, knowledge) as sense perception, memory, inference, and the like...so long as there are no relevant undefeated defeaters, hearers can justifiably accept the assertions of speakers *merely* on the basis of a speaker's testimony.” (438)
  - o Ie. “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 justifiably accept the testimony” (438)
- Defeaters could be:
  - o 1) psychological: “a doubt or belief that is had by S that indicates that S'd belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained. Defeaters...function by virtue of being *had* by S, regardless of their truth value or justificatory status” (438)
  - o 2) normative: “a doubt or belief that S *ought to have* that indicates that S's belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained. Defeaters in this sense function by virtue of being doubts or beliefs that S *should have* (whether or not S does have them) given the presence of certain available evidence” (438).
- Other beliefs, doubts, can undermine the defeater's power. Normative defeaters can be defeated by reasons.
  - o An undefeated defeater: “When one has a defeater *d* for one's belief that *p* that is not itself defeated” (439); this is incompatible with testimonial knowledge.

Reductionists: “in order to justifiedly accept the testimony of speakers, more is needed than the mere absence of undefeated defeaters...hearers must have sufficiently good *positive reasons* for accepting a given report, reasons that are not themselves ineliminably based on the testimony of others” (439)

- Global: “the justification of *testimony as a source of belief* reduces to the justification of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference” (439)
  - o You need reasons for why testimony is in general reliable
- Local: “the justification of *each particular report or instance of testimony* reduces to the justification of instances of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference...a hearer must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting *the particular report in question*” (440)

Objections to global reductionism:

1) would need so many reasons in order to justify that belief, it's not going to happen; we also don't necessarily have the skills to do that in all areas;

2) not clear that “There even is an epistemically significant *fact of the matter* regarding the general reliability of testimony” (440); lots of different kinds, sources, contexts, topics, etc.

Objections to local reductionism:

1) kids get lots of testimonial knowledge from their parents and teachers, not clear they could ever be justified in that this way;

2) we seem to get knowledge from people we don't know, like directions.

So, non-reductionism seems better, none of that mess. Though it might lead us into gullibility, epistemic irresponsibility, irrationality. The paper ends with a final case pushing this objection.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Author:** Jennifer Lackey

**Possible Applications:**

- Epistemology
- Feminist Epistemology
- Social Epistemology

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- Lackey, Jennifer. "Pitted Against Yourself: Credibility and False Confessions."  
<https://blog.apaonline.org/2016/04/21/pitted-against-yourself-credibility-and-false-confessions/>
- Goldman, Alvin I. "Discrimination and perceptual knowledge."
- Hume, David. "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding."
- Reed, Baron. "Epistemic Circularity Squared? Skepticism about Common Sense."

**Possible Class Activities:**

- Intuition pump: What requirements are there for getting knowledge from testimony?