

# TESTIMONY AND OTHER MINDS

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In this paper I defend the claim that testimony can serve as a basic source of knowledge of other people's mental lives against the objection that testimonial knowledge presupposes knowledge of other people's mental lives and therefore can't be used to explain it.

## 1. Introduction

The problem of other minds is often presented as a problem in accounting for the source of our knowledge of other people's mental lives. Responses to this problem tend to fall into two categories: either they claim that we come to know other people's mental lives through some form of inference or they hold that perception can be a source of such knowledge. The failure to consider any other source of knowledge suggests an implicit assumption structuring the debate: that inference and perception exhaust the space of possible options. ([McNeill 2012] provides a recent example of the debate being set up in this way.)

However, when one reflects on the way in which we know about the mental lives of other people, it's not perception or inference which stands out as the central means by which we come to know about others' mental lives. Rather, other people *tell* us things, and amongst the great variety of things they tell us are facts about their own mental lives. I know that Imran is hoping for a Labour victory because he told me so; Priya said that

she's fed up with work. Any natural and unprejudiced account of our social interactions has to accept the centrality of testimony to our knowledge of other people's mental lives. Yet the possibility of our acquiring such knowledge through testimony is strikingly absent from these debates. The aim of this paper is to cast doubt on one reason for ignoring testimony as a source of our knowledge of other people's mental lives.

## 2. Testimony

Let us start with a very general formulation of the question which structures this debate:

(OM): How is it possible to know about other people's mental lives?

(OM) is sometimes claimed to allow two different readings: one on which it asks how it is possible to know *what* another person thinks or feels, and one on which it asks how it is possible to know *that* another person thinks or feels [Avramides 2001, p.219], [Cassam 2007, p.156]. This distinction is helpful so long as one recognises that the 'what' in the first question is interrogative and not relative: as Austin points out, 'I know what he is feeling' is not 'There is an x which both I know and he is feeling' but 'I know the answer to the question "What is he feeling?"' [Austin 1946, p.96]. In this sense, to know *what* another person thinks or feels is to know *that* he or she is thinking or feeling some particular way. I will return to the distinction between the 'what' and 'that' questions below, but for the purposes of motivating this discussion, let our focus be the question of how it is possible to know what another person thinks or feels.

The claim I want to explore can be stated as follows:

(T): Testimony can be a basic source of knowledge of other people's mental lives.

The modifier 'basic' is needed since the exclusion of testimony from these debates would be justified if testimonially-acquired knowledge were only possible given the presence of perceptual or inferentially-acquired knowledge of another's mental life. The claim to be defended is that testimony can be a way of finding out about others' minds even in the

absence of any other source of such knowledge. Note that this is not to say that testimony could be the *sole* source of such knowledge for we plausibly have some knowledge of others' minds which isn't acquired via testimony. (Consider our relations with those such as infants who are unable to testify.) The claim is only that testimony is a basic source of knowledge of others' minds.

Are there any reasons for the absence of testimony from these debates? One reason for ignoring testimony would be if testimonially-acquired knowledge were either a species of inferentially-acquired knowledge or a species of perceptually acquired knowledge, for then issues concerning the possibility of acquiring knowledge of another's mental life through testimony would be covered in discussions about the possibility of acquiring such knowledge through either inference or perception. Let me consider each of these disjuncts in turn.

According to *inferential* or *reductionist* models of testimony, testimonial knowledge is a kind of inferential knowledge. Asha tells you that she is thinking of Zora. You know that Asha uttered a certain phrase and you know some generalisation linking utterances to truths. From this knowledge you can infer that Asha is thinking of Zora. On this picture, testimonial knowledge is based on 'our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses.' [Hume 1975 [1748], p.111]. Someone who endorses this model of testimony will hold that the questions concerning the possibility of gaining knowledge of others' minds through testimony fall under issues raised about the possibility of gaining such knowledge through inference.

Yet the claim that testimonial knowledge is a kind of inferential knowledge is a controversial one in epistemology. Critics have charged that the proposed inductive base is insufficient to secure knowledge; that any such inference would have to rely on testimony; that such a view implausibly denies testimonial knowledge to young children [Coady 1992]. For this reason those who write on our knowledge of others' minds are not entitled to assume that testimonial knowledge is a form of inferential knowledge without notice. And, regardless, those who discuss inference in the other minds literature focus almost exclusively on the *non-testimonial* inference of mental states from observed behaviour.

Similar considerations apply to the claim that testimonial knowledge is a species of perceptual knowledge. For although many of those who reject the reduction of testimonial knowledge to a form of inferential knowledge have stressed the similarities between testimony and perception [e.g. McDowell 1994], they do not claim that testimonial knowledge is a form of perceptual knowledge. Rather they hold that testimony is a basic, non-inferential and non-perceptual source of knowledge. So those who write on our knowledge of others' minds are not entitled to ignore testimony as a source of such knowledge on the grounds that testimonial knowledge is a form of perceptual knowledge without some defence of this very contestable claim.

Each of these reasons for ignoring testimony in debates about our knowledge of others' minds rests on very general claims about the nature of testimony: that testimonial knowledge is a case of knowledge gained through inference; that testimonial knowledge is a form of perceptual knowledge. But there is a more interesting argument against (T) to consider, one which turns on issues specific to the other minds debate and which would justify the absence of testimony from discussions of our knowledge of others' minds.

Consider the following passage from Barry Stroud in which he considers the possibility of appealing to testimony to warrant our beliefs about another's mental:

The question of other minds is how anyone can know what someone else thinks or feels. But it would be ludicrous to reply that someone can know what another person thinks or feels by asking a good friend of that person's. That would be no answer at all, but not because it is not true... The trouble is that it explains how we know some particular fact in the area we are interested in by appeal to knowledge of some other fact in that same domain. [Stroud 1989, p.101]

The claim here is that acquiring knowledge on the basis of testimony requires knowledge about the testifier's mental states. So testimonial knowledge presupposes knowledge of other people's mental lives and can't be used to explain it. According to Stroud, (T) is ludicrous

Why think that testimonial knowledge requires knowledge about the testifier's mental states? Quassim Cassam provides one reason:

As for testimony, I'm only going to take someone else's word for it that I am not alone in the world if I take it that his words are expressive of genuine thoughts, that is, if I already take myself to know of the existence of at least one other thinker. Since the possibility of knowing this is precisely what is at issue we still lack an answer to [the question]. [Cassam 2007: p.157]

H.H. Price offers the same reasoning some half-century earlier:

One might say, the suggestion is that one's evidence for the existence of other minds comes from communication-situations. But this would be question-begging. For communication is by definition a relation between two or more minds. Thus if I have reason to believe that a communication is occurring, I must already have reason to believe that a mind other than my own exists. [Price 1938, pp.429-430]

Call this the knowledge-presupposition argument against (T). According to this argument, testimony cannot serve as a basic source of knowledge of other people's mental lives because testimony presupposes knowledge of other minds and therefore can't be used to explain it. (Compare [Russell 1914, pp.91-2] and [Coliva 2014, p.257 fn.22] for further expressions of this reasoning spanning the last century.)

The knowledge-presupposition argument effectively links together the 'what' and 'that' questions about our knowledge of others' minds distinguished above: knowing *what* another person thinks on and feels on the basis of testimony presupposes knowing *that* she thinks and feels. So testimony cannot be a source of knowledge of what another person thinks and feels [Cassam 2007, p.156, pp.157-8]. And although both Cassam and Price phrase the argument in terms of temporal priority, their real concern is epistemic priority: gaining knowledge on the basis of testimony epistemically presupposes that one possess knowledge of other minds and thus can't be used to explain it.

It is worth considering the knowledge-presupposition argument as it turns on considerations which are internal to the problem of other minds: the claim is not that testimony cannot serve as a basic source of knowledge and therefore, *a fortiori*, cannot serve as a basic source of our knowledge of others' minds. Rather, the argument claims that testimony presupposes knowledge of others' minds specifically and thus cannot serve as a basic source of *such* knowledge. If the knowledge-presupposition argument is

good, testimony cannot be a basic source of our knowledge of others' minds.

The knowledge-presupposition argument aims to support the following claim:

(KP): A subject can know that p on the basis of testimony from O only if she already knows that O is a thinker.

The argument in support of (KP) runs as follows. (A): in order for testimony to serve as a source of knowledge, I must take the words of other people to be expressive of thoughts. But I can take them as expressive of thoughts only if I know that the other person is a thinker. So if testimony is to provide knowledge of other minds, some knowledge of other minds must already be possessed. Thus testimony cannot serve as a basic source of our knowledge of others' minds.

We can formulate this argument as a series of necessary conditions:

1. In order for S to know that p on the basis of testimony from O, S must take the words of O as expressive of thoughts.
2. In order for S to take the words of O as expressive of thoughts, S must know that O is a thinker.
3. Thus in order for S to know that p on the basis of testimony from O, S must know that O is a thinker.

Since the knowledge that O is a thinker is a piece of knowledge which concerns another's mental life, testimonially-acquired knowledge entails knowledge of another's mind. The conclusion drawn is that testimony presupposes knowledge and thus cannot serve as a basic source of knowledge of another's mental life.

One question about this argument concerns the notion of taking someone's words to be expressive of thoughts. I will take this to involve knowing that another person's words are expressive of thoughts. (This ensures that the second premise is not falsified by cases of mistaken belief.) So formulated, the argument claims that testimonial knowledge requires knowing that another person's words express thoughts, and that this

knowledge requires knowing that she is a thinker. Such is the argument in support of (KP).

How should we evaluate this argument? Certain forms of externalism allow the option of rejecting the second premise. A simple form of reliabilism about testimony, for example, will hold that one can know that *p* on the basis of testimony from *O* just so long as forming beliefs on the basis of *O*'s testimony is a reliable process of belief-formation. Similarly, Plantinga's account of warrant holds that knowing that *p* on the basis of testimony from *O* requires only that my belief be produced by my faculties functioning properly in an appropriate environment [Plantinga 1993, p.82]. In both cases, the truth of the first premise ensures that the knowledge in question counts as testimonially-based, but the second premise can be rejected since the status of my belief as knowledge depends only on facts about my cognitive faculties and their environment and not on the beliefs I hold about my informant.

A second response is suggested by J.L. Austin: 'believing in other persons, in authority and testimony is an essential part of the act of communicating, an act which we all constantly perform... But there is no 'justification' for our doing [these things] as such.' [1946: p.115]. Austin's intention is not obvious, but perhaps the suggestion is that our belief in testimony – our belief that the words of other people express thoughts – is not something which itself requires justification: it is instead a precondition for engaging in communication. '[W]e don't talk with people (descriptively) except in the faith that they are trying to convey information' [1946: p.82-3]. Since this faith does not itself require justification, taking other people's words to be expressive of thoughts is not conditional on any particular piece of knowledge. This provides a way of rejecting the second premise.

Neither option is without problem. The second response claims that a belief in testimony can be required for the epistemic warrant provided by testimony even though that belief in testimony is outside the context of justification. And many will worry this grounds an epistemic status in a non-epistemic factor. More significantly, with regards to both responses, it is worth noting how plausible it is that the kinds of interactions which characterise our testimonial engagement with other people evince the knowledge that other people have minds. Imagine asking someone for directions to the train station. It seems odd to think that one can

undertake this activity whilst remaining neutral on the question of whether the other person is minded. Testimonial interactions, on the face of it, do seem to presuppose that we take one another to be minded. To this extent, it is worth exploring whether there is a response to the knowledge-presupposition argument which accepts claims (1) to (3) whilst denying the philosophical use to which they are put. In the rest of this paper I motivate such a response.

### 3. Presupposition & Independence

Consider a comparable argument (B) made for knowledge gained on the basis of perception: in order for perception to serve as a source of knowledge, I must take my perceptual experiences to be revelatory of the world around me. But I can only take my perceptual experiences to be revelatory of the world if I know that I am perceiving. So if perception is to provide us with knowledge of the external world, the knowledge that one is perceiving must already be presupposed. Thus perception cannot serve as a basic source of knowledge of the external world.

Arguments of this form have been used by Barry Stroud to motivate various versions of philosophical scepticism [Stroud 1996: pp.131-133]. We can formulate the argument in such a way as to bring out the structural similarities with (A):

- 1'. In order for S to know that p on the basis of perception, S must take her experiences as revelatory of the world.
- 2'. In order for S to take her experiences as revelatory of the world, S must know that she is perceiving.
- 3'. Thus in order for S to know that p on the basis of perception, S must know that she is perceiving.

This argument purports to support a perceptual version of the knowledge-presupposition claim (KP'): A subject can know that p on the basis of perception only if she already knows that she is perceiving. The knowledge that I am perceiving is presupposed by my perceptual knowledge of the world.

The argument in (B) can be resisted in the same way as the argument in (A). Certain forms of externalism will deny that perceptual knowledge

requires a subject to believe that her experiences are revelatory of the world; others will deny that 'hinge propositions' such as the belief that one's experience is revelatory of the world are conditional on further knowledge. However, an alternative option is to accept claims (1') to (3') whilst denying that they prevent perception from serving as a basic source of knowledge of the external world.

Consider two distinct conditions one might place on perceptual knowledge:

(P1): In order to know that p on the basis of perception, one must know that one is perceiving.

(P2): In order to know that p on the basis of perception, one must know that one is perceiving *independently* of what one takes oneself to know on the basis of perceiving.

The argument in (B) motivates only the first claim, but it is the second which is needed if the knowledge that I am perceiving is to be presupposed in a way which prevents perception serving as a basic source of knowledge.

We can see this as follows. Someone who accepts (P1) will hold that it is a condition on possessing perceptual knowledge that one know that one is perceiving. To this extent, the argument in (B) is good: a subject who takes her experience to be revelatory of the world must take her experience of a pig in the garden as reason to believe both that there is a pig in the garden and that she is perceiving. And any warrant which the fact of her seeing a pig confers upon the proposition that there is a pig in the garden is also conferred upon the proposition that she is perceiving. So both claims are known. But the knowledge that she is perceiving is not known *independently* of what she takes herself to know on the basis of perceiving: rather, it is precisely because she sees and thereby knows that there is a pig in the garden that she knows that she is perceiving.

This is an account of the relation between perception and knowledge which has been urged upon us by John McDowell: 'one's knowledge that one is not dreaming', he writes 'owes its credentials as knowledge to the fact that one's senses are yielding one knowledge of the environment – something that does not happen when one is dreaming' [1986: p.238]; a

subject's reasons for believing that she is not dreaming 'can reside in all the knowledge of the environment that [her] senses are yielding' [1995, p.408]. On this picture, a subject's knowledge that she is perceiving has its root in the same source as her knowledge of how things stand around her, namely the correct operation of her sensory capacities upon the environment.

Marking the distinction between (P1) and (P2) allows us to resist the argument in (B). In order for the argument in (B) to show that a certain piece of knowledge is presupposed in a way which would prevent perception from serving as a basic source of knowledge, one would need to think of the knowledge that one is perceiving as having been acquired independently of one's perceptual capacities. But nothing compels us to accept this claim. So long as we think of perception as affording us knowledge both of the environment around us and of the fact that we are perceiving, we can accept claims (1') to (3') whilst allowing perception to serve as a basic source of knowledge.

Let us return to the case of testimony. According to the knowledge-presupposition argument it is a condition on acquiring knowledge through testimony that one already know the testifier to be a thinker. We can now see that the argument in support of this claim conflates two distinct conditions one might place on testimonial knowledge:

(Q1): In order to know that p on the basis of testimony from O, one must know that O is a thinker.

(Q2): In order to know that p on the basis of testimony from O, one must know that O is a thinker *independently* of what one takes oneself to know about her on the basis of testimony.

It is (Q2) which is needed to support (KP), but claims (1) to (3) only motivate (Q1). And (Q1) is compatible with testimony serving as a basic source of knowledge of others' mental lives.

Assume that (Q1) is true. Then a subject who knows that p on the basis of testimony from O also knows that O is a thinker. This condition is met because a subject who takes Priya's testimony as grounds for believing that she is tired must also take her testimony as grounds for believing that she is

a thinker. And any warrant which her testimony confers upon the first proposition is also conferred upon the second: to this extent, both claims are known. But a subject's knowledge that Priya is a thinker is not *independent* of what it is that Priya has told her: rather it is in virtue of hearing what it is that she has said that you know both what she thinks and that she is thinker. Testimony can serve as a basic source of knowledge of others' mental lives.

#### 4. Knowledge

This way of defending (T) against the knowledge-presupposition argument makes use of a conception of knowledge on which one's knowledge-generating capacities can provide one with knowledge of facts which are themselves conditions on the proper operation of those capacities. Some will find such circularity or bootstrapping objectionable. And there is much discussion in the perceptual knowledge literature as to whether responses of this sort are acceptable. Can anything be said in its favour?

Two small points to begin. First, responses of this form are taken seriously in discussions of perceptual knowledge of the external world and there is no reason to think that they do not have application for the case of testimonial knowledge of others' minds. Second – though this perhaps has the form of a *tu quoque* – those who accept McDowell's move as a possible response in the case of perceptual knowledge, as Cassam himself does [2007: pp.30ff], have no reason to shun a comparable move for the case of testimonial knowledge of others' minds. So there is at least a *prima facie* reason for exploring its application in this context.

Are there any positive reasons for endorsing the strategy? Consider first reasons given to reject (P2) in the case of perceptual knowledge. Those who hold that a subject can know that p on the basis of perception without antecedently ruling out sceptical scenarios often appeal to two characteristics of perceptual experience in support. First, that the phenomenology of perceptual experience takes a stand on how things are in the world: perception has a peculiar 'phenomenal force' [Pryor 2000, p.547, n.37] and that phenomenal character seems to ground our knowledge of how things are in the world independently of our knowing that we are perceiving. Second, that perception is a primitive source of our knowledge of the external world such that if perception could not enable knowledge without our having independently ruled our sceptical scenarios,

then knowledge of the external world would be much reduced: the rejection of (P2) thus has ‘anti-skeptical punch’ [Pryor 2000, p.537; see also Silins 2007, pp.118-9 and cf. Wright 2002].

A number of authors have used a comparison with perception to motivate the analogous thought that the acquisition of knowledge through testimony does not require antecedently knowing those facts which are conditions on the acquisition of knowledge through testimony [McDowell 1994; Burge 1993, 1997]. But Paul Faulkner has argued that the considerations which motivate the rejection of (P2) cannot be extended to the case of testimony. First, ‘[t]he phenomenology of testimony is *not* authoritative because testimony does not transparently reveal the world in the manner of perception’. And second, ‘testimony is not our primary source of particular empirical knowledge’, so the denial that testimony is a source of basic knowledge does not entail skepticism about the external world [Faulkner 2006, p.255].

There are a number of different ways one might respond to Faulkner, but for our purposes here, it is worth noting that Faulkner’s objections concern only testimony about the external world. And, for such testimony, his observations seem accurate: a subject’s act of testifying about the weather in Manchester doesn’t ‘transparently reveal the world’ in the manner of perceptual experience; and, since it is always possible for me to come to know about the weather in Manchester without testimony, such testimony is not a primary source of knowledge. This raises the question: do Faulkner’s considerations hold good when we restrict our concern to a subject’s testimony about her own mental states?

Consider first the phenomenology of a subject’s testimony concerning her own mental states. There is a genuine sense here in which such testimony seems to ‘transparently reveal’ the mind of the attester: another person’s assertions about what she thinks and feels don’t seem to us to be neutral on the contents of her mental life. (This observation features in much of the neo-expressivist literature on self-knowledge: see [Bar-On 2000] for one way of capturing the thought.) In the same way that it is ‘intuitively very natural to think that... *the mere fact* that one has a visual experience of that phenomenological sort is enough to make it reasonable for one to believe that there are hands’ [Pryor 2000, p.536], so too is it intuitively very natural to think that another person’s testimony that she is thinking about Manchester is enough to make it reasonable to believe that she is

thinking about Manchester – and to do so without one having independent reason to believe that she has a mind.

Second, although testimony is not our primary source of knowledge of the external world, it *is* the central way by which we come to know about other people's mental lives. Consider our knowledge of what other people are thinking about, hoping for, visually imagining. It's hard to know how one would come to have such knowledge were it not for the fact that other people are capable of telling us things. And the centrality of testimony to our knowledge of others' minds seems comparable to the centrality of perception to our knowledge of the external world. Approaches which hold that the acquisition of knowledge through testimony requires independent knowledge that another has a mind risk the severe delimitation of such knowledge, and thus the rejection of (Q2) can play a role in a modest anti-sceptical project (Pryor 2000, p.517).

This way of motivating the rejection of (Q2) turns on considerations particular to a subject's testimony concerning her own mental life. And it nicely illustrates that someone who is attracted by the defence of (T) offered above is not required to adopt the same strategy for all cases of testimony. This is something that Pryor has stressed in his work: one can think that our knowledge in certain domains is independent of some conditions and not independent of others (Pryor 2004, p.354). Rejection of the knowledge-presupposition argument requires only that knowledge gained on the basis of testimony doesn't presuppose knowing that one's informant is a thinker. That claim is motivated by considerations distinctive of another person's testimony concerning her own mental life. And it leaves open that there are other conditions which are not so independent.

To conclude: testimony doesn't presuppose knowledge of another's mind in a way which prevents it from serving as a basic source of such knowledge. And it is considerations about the phenomenology of and centrality of other people's testimony concerning their own mental lives which make it plausible that this is so. The knowledge-presupposition argument against (T) can be resisted.

How does this discussion bear on (OM)? We are now in a position to see why we shouldn't treat the 'what' and 'that' versions of (OM) as disjoint.

In allowing that testimony can be a basic source of knowledge of *what* other people think and feel, we have provided an account of how one can thereby come to know *that* other people think and feel: there is no need to provide a separate answer to each question [cf. Cassam 2007, pp.158-159]. Marking the distinction between the two different readings of (OM) must not mislead us into thinking that an account of how one knows *that* there are other people who think and feel must proceed independently of and prior to an account of how one knows *what* they are thinking and feeling.

It may be instructive to finish by dispelling a confusion which can make (T) seem incredible. Testimony is often taken to be non-generative in the following sense: whenever testimony is a source of knowledge, it transfers knowledge from one party to another without generating it. ([Audi 1997] presents the orthodox view; see [Lackey 1999] for a dissenting opinion.) We can express this non-generative nature as follows: A can only come to know that p on the basis of testimony from B if B herself knows that p. One might think that the non-generative nature of testimony prevents it from serving as a basic answer to any question of the form ‘how is it possible to know about p?’ for, if this condition holds, testimony never creates knowledge, it only transmits it.

But the non-generative nature of testimony is entirely compatible with testimony providing basic knowledge of another’s mind so long as we think that the people who are testifying have non-testimonial ways of knowing about their own mental lives. Consider an analogy: say that romantic engagements all take place behind closed doors. In such a situation, testimony would serve as a basic source of knowledge of others’ romantic engagements, since gossip, innuendo and boasting would be our sole source of information about such encounters. But this is compatible with the thought that testimony does not generate new knowledge for each subject has a non-testimonial way of knowing of her own engagements. The non-generative nature of testimony presents no obstacle to endorsement of (T).<sup>1</sup>

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