

# Trusting others. The epistemological authority of testimony\*

Fernando BRONCANO

BIBLID [0495-4548 (2008) 23: 61; pp. 11-22]

ABSTRACT: I propose to consider the interpersonal character of testimony as a kind of social bond created by the mutual intention of sharing knowledge. The paper explores the social mechanism that supports this mutual intention starting from an initial situation of modelling the other's epistemic perspective. Accepting testimony as a joint action creates epistemic duties and responsibilities and the eventual success can be considered as a genuine achievement at the social level of epistemology. Trust is presented here as the symptom that both parties are involved in such a social bond.

Keywords: testimony, social epistemology, joint actions, trust.

1

What makes social epistemology “social”? What makes social epistemology “epistemological”? What is testimony? In this paper, I propose to consider to what extent these questions are related, and how the answer to the third one could shed some light on the nature of social epistemology. As it is well known, much of our knowledge is obtained from others simply by attending to their actions and words. Certainly, the most part of this knowledge, I will claim, is acquired from instrumental grounds and not by testimony. For example, when I meet a tourist asking for the Prado Museum, I obtain the knowledge that she has some competence in Spanish without mediating a testimonial act. Nevertheless, part of the knowledge acquired from others is substantively testimonial, as for example when, while foraging for wild mushrooms, I inquire: “Is this a dangerous one?”, and receive the answer: “No, this is an *Amanita Cesarea*, you can eat it safely”. This is a case of a non-instrumental testimonial act involving explicit epistemic intentions of transmitting and sharing knowledge. In this case, hearers should consider that what is transmitted is knowledge to be shared, and that the transaction should be praised as having an epistemological value. From this point of view, testimony takes part in the variegated forms of social cooperation which our collective life consists of; and as cooperative acts, they should be placed at the core of any social epistemology. The status of this cooperation can be viewed as a social micro-institution in the sense of a social bond normatively ruled that creates epistemic rights and duties to the participants.

In order to account for the status of this micro-institution we can follow the productive approach of imagining an epistemic State of Nature in which individuals were

---

\* This paper has been considerably improved in philosophical as well as in linguistic aspects with the aid of Jesús Vega. Remaining deficiencies are my responsibility. Previous versions were read in Madrid and Buenos Aires (SADAF). Thanks to the respective audiences. This research was funded by two grants of the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (MEC): HUM2006-08236 and HUM-2006-03221.



prone to seek good informants. Exploiting this analogy, Craig proposes a fictional scenario where one would be able to assert of a good informant:

Either  $p$  and he believes that  $p$ , or not- $p$  and he believes that not- $p$ . (Craig 1990, p. 12)

Unhappily, we are not yet faced here with complete acts of epistemic collaboration. Certainly, the worried inhabitants of this world are seeking good *instruments* to obtain information, but they are not prepared to share hitherto a common project with epistemological significance. Furthermore, testimony (considered as a micro-institution) claims of the participants an explicit assent to the aim of sharing knowledge with a collaborative intentional attitude. Some expressions of human sociality take the form of joint actions which require explicit collaborative intentions, and testimony is, in my view, one of them. Otherwise, it would be impossible to build the minimal social bonds required to carry out social actions, such as voting, marrying someone or signing contracts. In acts like these, the others are not treated as instruments to obtain personal aims; on the contrary, they are taken to be persons whose voluntary consent is required to reach mutual goals thereby assumed by this act. Consent represents here a necessary (and very often sufficient) condition to consider the act as a genuine social *achievement*. I propose to view testimony as an act of this kind, that is, as an act which demands explicit consent from both speaker and hearer, and which requires from them explicit recognition of the situation in which they are involved. This recognition places the agents in a special epistemic perspective: they see themselves as subject to social bonds of trust in order to share knowledge.

## 2

Accounts of testimony are usually classified in *evidential and non-evidential* conceptions, according to the importance each attributes to social features in epistemology. On the evidentialist side, the most puritan and anti-testimonial position refuses any kind of epistemic authority to testimony. Generally, such an astringent position is ascribed to Descartes and Locke as representatives of a radical individualism. A more liberal conception is a sort of reductionism that concedes to testimony certain epistemological import as far as one infers from the speaker's prior behaviour that he is a reliable informant. Classically, Hume would be a significant defender of this inferential and reductionist position (and more recently E. Fricker and maybe also J. Lackey). On the non-evidentialist side, we can find authors that view testimony as an epistemic constitutive condition for many social practices. Thomas Reid is alleged to be the first spokesman of an epistemology more congenial to social features. Some current philosophers, such as Coady (1992), Burge (1993) and McDowell (1994) have also provided arguments (although based on different general epistemological conceptions) that regard testimony as an epistemic source. From this view, the epistemological authority derives from the basic structure of our communicative practices and from our nature of creatures living within a space of reasons instead of a prior evidential basis for accepting the testimony.

Notwithstanding, despite this wide spectrum of possible explanations about what grounds the epistemic significance and authority of testimony, testimony confronts

the following dilemma: if we are too demanding about the conditions required to accept testimony as a source of knowledge, we will suffer the loss of our more common and cherished beliefs; if we are too liberal, we will be threatened by alien interests and we will risk becoming members of a gullible community. The first horn of the dilemma arises from establishing too demanding criteria for accepting testimony. For example, if we required a prior justification that the source is reliable before accepting the content of a testimony, the most part of our beliefs gained by testimony would become ungrounded. Moreover, as Gloria Origgi (2004) remarks, making explicit this demand would lead furthermore to destroy the very possibility of building an epistemic community, because of the bad effects that distrust provokes on the social bonds articulating such community. But the other horn of the dilemma is not less deleterious: not assessing the speaker's reliability would amount to the possibility that our beliefs be imposed on us by alien interests (Fricker 1994).

Although the dilemma arises as a result of the application of rational criteria with different degrees of strength, the differences depend ultimately on views about the nature and the role played by the epistemic agents involved in testimonial situations. In this paper, I propose to consider the question about the epistemological authority of testimony by attending to the normal conditions under which the testimony is given and accepted. A fruitful analysis is provided by Gloria Origgi, (Origgi 2004, 2005, and 2006) who defends that every testimonial situation involves strong bonds of trust between the speaker and the hearer. This could be a possible strategy of escaping the dilemma, because the normative conditions that regulate the success of a bond of trust could at its turn provide with sufficient normative basis for the justification of the belief without succumbing to the horns of the dilemma. The essential point made by Origgi is that trust goes deeper than what it is supposed by a mere inference to the reliability of others' beliefs and the probability of them to be true given the history of the speaker. The very nature of trust understood as a social bond assures that. Take for example the confidence that a partner in a couple has in the other's loving fidelity: it could hardly be considered as a probabilistic calculus about a possible unfaithful behaviour without destroying the trust between them. Analogously, Origgi postulates a sort of epistemic trust, according to which the speaker's commitment to her own words is a condition for the acceptance of the testimony on the part of the hearer.

Regarding the issue of when the acceptance of others' words is justified, this justification depends on the success conditions of a trusting relationship. The reason why trust is so central in the epistemology of testimony is that it can be viewed as an entrenched attitude in our lives. Thus, trust covers a great variety of communicative acts that are not necessarily of epistemological import. In fact, trust covers not only cases of epistemic dependence but any case of dependence. This fact is relevant in the response Paul Faulkner (Faulkner 2000) offers in his criticism of Burge's Principle of Acceptance. This principle states that it is rational to accept testimony by default. Burge holds the principle on the basis of considerations of rationality for communica-

tive acts. “One of reason’s primary functions is that of presenting truth.”<sup>1</sup> But, then—Faulkner argues—

Our purposes in communicating, however, are *not* merely to inform our audiences. (...) Our purposes in communicating are many and varied. Few of these communicative purposes seem to *require* that a speaker believe what he expresses. (...) One does not ordinarily acquire testimonial knowledge from a speaker who presents that *p* as true and yet believes it to be false. Yet, if the speaker were merely fooling, it would be wrong to call him insincere. An insincere reassurance may be a lie. A joke is not. (Faulkner 2000, p. 589)

The fact is that even in communicative acts such as jokes or ironies, a kind of communicative trust is required in the speaker that goes beyond the rationality aimed at the transmission of truth that Burge had postulated. For trust to become epistemic trust, it is necessary to take into account many factors present in the communicative situation. Some of them concern the type of speech act that the speaker is intending to perform; however other questions are also relevant as, for instance, more basic considerations mediating in the attitude of the speaker in answering the request of the hearer. When we select someone as the target of our questioning, we previously consider him or her as a person that could answer to the (epistemic) needs of others. And only then we are regarding him or her under the point of view of his or her reliability. The point is that some of the conditions to achieve a communicative goal depend on a more basic attitude of trust in others. Perhaps, this attitude of trust involved in testimony derives from more basic faculties, constitutive of our sociality, such as our capacity to simulate the mind of others. Trust would be an affective response to the simulation process that the hearer performs in the context of a communicative situation. From this point of view, trust cannot be attributed only to ideal subjects under ideal conditions of communication, because this attitude emerges essentially in the context of concrete communicative situations.

Notwithstanding, one could argue that this trust should too be justified by epistemic reasons concerning the reliability of the speaker. If so, postulating a kind of epistemic trust would confront the same dilemma as any other explanation of testimonial justification. For if it is grounded on a probabilistic estimation of reliability, trust would not be necessary, because the calculus does all the work. And if it is not grounded on any reason, trust would become a blind attitude leading to disastrous consequences. However, notice that the attitude of trust could be assented on other grounds than a current reasoning about the reliability of the speaker as an informant. In fact, one evaluates some situations in other terms. For instance, when flying, one does not evaluate a pilot’s competence to fly; one trusts simply an extended social system of transport. The ground of this is that trust is social before being epistemological, and this deeper status in our life allows a way out of the dilemma.

The interesting point of grounding testimony on trust is that, as an epistemic process, testimony requires recognizing the communicative will of another person, as a subject gifted with intrinsic freedom to act. This recognition is not necessary when we consider the grounds of other sources of knowledge, such as perception or memory. For instance, while retrieving information from our memory involves an internal sys-

---

<sup>1</sup> Burge 1993, p. 469, quoted by Faulkner 2000, p. 584.

tem of the agent working adequately, the will does not intervene in the process of acquiring the belief (excepting in the trivial sense of intending to remind something). The same could be said of perception. In the case of testimony, however, the irreducible presence of the will is secured by the appearance in the scene of a subject that transmits or shares knowledge. This presence involves not merely the consideration of the reliability of the speaker as informant, but also the recognition of the epistemic import of her personal commitment in testifying. I think that the alleged trust is an answer that takes into account this unavoidable presence of the subject, a presence which goes deeper than a mere probabilistic estimation about the link between the testimony of the speaker and the truth.

## 3

The problem concerning the epistemological authority of testimony can be approached in terms of the epistemic significance that the climate of trust pervading testimonial situations has. Correspondingly, the epistemic value of knowledge gained by testimony should be addressed in terms of the epistemic import of trust. Thus the genuine social level of testimonial acts is made explicit: trust is only given to, or received from, persons showing certain interpersonal and mutual dependence in particular situations. Responsibility emerges from a reciprocal understanding of the situation as a situation where the persons involved are answering to the epistemic needs manifested by others. This creation of mutual responsibilities contrasts with situations in which only an instrumental relationship is involved. For instance, a doctor examining the body of a patient takes him as an instrument, that is, merely as a source of information in which his will is not essentially involved. It is obvious that the relationship exhibited in the medical exam does not become a case for social epistemology.

In cases of testimony, one could also be tempted by the medical model. Nonetheless, this temptation must be resisted, because we would lose the necessary role played by the will of other subjects in testimonial situations. We must suppose that others' will is essentially involved in the final success of a testimonial process. If the will wouldn't make any difference in testimony, one should be committed, for instance, to the acceptance of torture as a source of testimonial evidence. A torturer who inflicts pain to his victim intends to gain some information from his source. Although the will is involved in this process, it is a constrained one and regarded as a mere instrument. The fact that testimony essentially involves the wills of the participants enables us to see the epistemic significance of testimony in a new light. The key question is: What is the role played by the personal level in an epistemological game engaging participants that freely assert propositions and that are disposed to accept or reject the received proposition?

Consider the evidentialist argument according to which an unsuccessful testimony is dependent on the speaker being mistaken about the truth of her belief and yet sincerely asserts the proposition. She asserts a false proposition and consequently the hearer does not gain knowledge. These cases are paradigmatically taken by evidentialists as an excuse for requiring premises more firmly grounded if one wishes to accept others' assertions. But this is not the only case of possible failure in testimony. The

speaker is involved in unsuccessful acts of testimony in two different ways. On the one hand, she could be mistaken about the proposition asserted. On the other hand, she could act against the epistemic responsibilities she must take in a testimonial situation. In this case, we are confronted with an *intentional* possibility of error. This fact paradigmatically distinguishes testimony from other sources of knowledge. Paul Faulkner has stressed the relevance of the speaker's intentions when accounting for the epistemological status of testimony. He notices that intentions open the possibility of being involved in what he calls the "dependability condition" (when the speaker believes that  $p$  is true and he is correct, it is the case that  $p$ ) and the "artfulness condition" (when the speaker believes that  $p$  is false, she is artful) (Faulkner 2000, pp. 586-587). In the last condition, the parallel with illusion arguments in the epistemology of perception breaks, "because the expression of something thought to be false is quite *intentional*" (p. 586).

Remote and weird scenarios imagined by epistemologists should not convince us that the artfulness condition works in the same way in for instance perceptual cases as in testimonial ones. The malevolent will is not playing the same role as other deceiving mechanisms of delivering information. It is not possible to make sense of a general strategy according to which the possibility of error and illusion would include also the case of malevolent or insincere testimony. Failure in gaining knowledge by testimony in these cases is dependent on the will of the speaker and not the result of faulty mechanisms. The speaker does not play the role of an intermediate as the perceptual veil is sometimes supposed to do, because his responsibility in the transmission of knowledge does not work here as a reliable or unreliable mechanism would do. He knows that  $p$  and then he decides what to do on the basis of other considerations. There is not a new veil, or perhaps metaphorically speaking, if there is one, it could be called a moral veil. Testimony works within the limits of a communicative scenario where speaker and hearer take mutually into account their respective epistemic perspectives.

Let us consider a possible objection raised by an instrumental position to this account of testimony: to obtain knowledge is, from an epistemological point of view, an instrumentally result-directed process driven by the essential aim of getting true propositions. On this account, *how* we get the result would be irrelevant. An instrument is characterized exclusively in functional terms; it matters only whether it works and how reliable it is, and we are not committed to any specific properties of the instrument. All instruments are equivalent in terms of their contributions to get the aim. From this point of view, the value of an instrument is measured in terms of the amount of truths it delivers to us; and the value of each instrument would be equivalent independently of the nature of the instrument and how it works when each delivers the very same amount of truths. Therefore, although persons were involved in the process, this shouldn't affect the instrumental result.

This instrumentalist account leads us to the following situation: either a defender of the distinctive character of testimony explains how the presence of personal wills makes a difference in the epistemic value of the results obtained or there is a risk of distorting the epistemological significance of testimony because it is reduced to a mere

instrumental process of gaining knowledge from some informational device, no matter if this is a person or not. A way out to this situation requires determining which value adds each component to the epistemic process of obtaining knowledge by testimony. In a process where two free agents adopt a social stance of asking for and giving information, are we just faced with a question of instrumental value? I would like to claim that the personal level matters because the human autonomy adds value and merit to the cognitive process. If knowing were aimed only to increase the amount of truths, the presence of the knowing subject would be dispensable. But if what matters is how a subject gets knowledge by her own merits, then the personal level would be crucial to the final value of knowing. Knowing should be attributed to knowing subjects and has to be grounded on their autonomy and choices.

Moreover, a consequent instrumental account would have some unpalatable consequences: perhaps we could have the same epistemic merit by gaining knowledge from a pathological liar as from other subjects simply by knowing that he always lies. Or consider cases of self-deception in which the subject knowing his failures corrects systematically his choices. But, in a Sartrean vein, these cases could be described as paradigmatic and unacceptable cases of *mauvaise foi*. Something seems being wrong when one can obtain information of his own self-deceptions. For what it is at stake is what kind of normative stance underlies our epistemic virtues and whether normativity has to do with our character as persons and not only with the good working of our cognitive systems.

## 4

The origin of an instrumentalist conception of testimony is the prevailing conception of an individualist epistemology. Hardwig defines epistemological individualism in this way: “the very core of rationality consists in preserving and adhering to one’s own independent judgement” (Hardwig 1985, p. 340). This would be the best way to preserve a Kantian principle of autonomy as the highest epistemic value. The autonomy principle is expressed under the maxim “think for oneself”. At first sight, testimony could be seen as threatening the primacy of this maxim, given that the hearer would accept a proposition based on trust and not on the evidence possessed by him. Is it necessary to abandon the epistemic value of autonomy in order to make possible the process of sharing and transmitting knowledge by testimony? Or is it maybe possible to embrace autonomy within the range of an interpersonal testimonial relationship? Does a social conception of knowledge necessarily lead to give up the principle of autonomy?

Hardwig has provided an argument against this abandonment. He starts from the observation that our ordinary and scientific practices very often hide situations of cognitive asymmetry. Scientists need frequently the expert judgment of other colleagues; thus, science depends loosely on the social division of cognitive labour. For Hardwig, this systematic dependence makes that the individualist be “confronted with a situation in which he must either suspend belief or —if this is impossible or undesirable— arrive at belief on some admittedly nonrational basis” (p. 343). But these situations are so common that they defeat an individualist account of our rationality. “Ra-

tionality sometimes consists in deferring to epistemic authority and, consequently, in passively and uncritically accepting what we are given to believe” (p. 343). It is not only trust but also genuine epistemic dependence that is involved in expert-layman situations. So the problem of the epistemic authority of testimony has to be regarded from the perspective of these situations of epistemic dependence. Hence, a certain “Principle of Testimony” seems valid in cases of epistemic dependence:

(T) If  $A$  has good reasons to believe that  $B$  has good reasons to believe that  $p$ , then  $A$  has good reasons to believe  $p$ . (Hardwig 1991, p. 697)

Although fine at first glance, nonetheless, this principle does not yet state genuine epistemological conditions for transmitting or sharing knowledge, because it applies only to mere doxastic conditions. Moreover, it should be clarified what could be the “good reasons” that the hearer has in order to accept the speaker’s assertion. Obviously, transmitting knowledge by testimony would be irrelevant if the hearer could have access to the evidential reasons of the speaker to assert that  $p$ . A condition for testimony to work adequately in this kind of contexts is that  $A$  conferred a certain kind of epistemic authority to  $B$ . In doing so, he recognizes himself as being epistemically dependent on the speaker. He needs to recognize (a) that he is in an insufficient epistemic position regarding the proposition  $p$  and (b) that  $B$  could be in a better epistemic position (has a potentially better epistemic access to  $p$ ).

Maybe we should accept a stronger principle of testimony, such as:

(T’) If  $A$  knows that  $B$  knows  $p$ , then  $A$  knows  $p$ . (Hardwig 1991, p. 698)

Hardwig rejects this principle by arguing that the consequences of its acceptance would be paradoxical in cases of epistemic dependence. For if we admit that  $A$  has knowledge by deference, then: i) it is possible for one to have this knowledge without the relevant evidence; and ii) more paradoxically, the subject can know that  $p$  “even though he doesn’t understand that  $p$ ” (Hardwig 1985, p. 345). Moreover, the cooperative procedures in scientific communities involve chains of testimony larger than two persons. For him, it is an “unpalatable conclusion” to admit that it is possible to acquire knowledge by deferring to others in these situations of massive dependence and cooperation. A better solution seems to be the adoption of a communitarian conception of knowledge possession: “Perhaps that  $p$  is known, not by any one person, but by the *community* composed of  $A$ ,  $B$ ,  $C$ ,  $D$ , and  $E$ . Perhaps  $D$  and  $E$  are not entitled to say, “I know that  $p$ ,” but only “We know that  $p$ ” (Hardwig 1985, p. 349).

Hardwig’s answer is surprising. In order to save the autonomy principle for beliefs, he seems ready to give up the possibility that knowledge be transmitted by testimony. But notice that the very same reasons that Hardwig gives for rejecting that  $B$ ,  $C$ , or  $D$  know by deference of others can be applied to the community of all of them when each affirms that “we know that  $p$ ”. The community as a kind of collective subject could not have examined nor even understood the evidence, because evidence and understanding are distributed among the members of the community. So, how is it possible that the individuals have only justified beliefs, but the community real knowledge? It could be said that Hardwig saves the doxastic autonomy of individuals at the price of their epistemic autonomy.



What is needed is a principle preserving the autonomy while granting those social bonds that add epistemological merit to the process. Such principle could be a modified version of Hardwig's principle:

(I'') If  $B$  knows  $p$  and  $B$  says in a testimonial act that  $p$  to  $A$ , then, if  $A$  recognizes her epistemic dependence on  $B$ ,  $A$  knows  $p$ .

In (I''), knowledge (not belief) is transmitted and shared, but it is not created by the process. The social level supports a climate surrounding the process that guarantees the subjects stepped from an initial situation of dependence in order to share knowledge. Social bonds of trust are here necessary but not sufficient to the creation of knowledge. Nevertheless, these bonds are sufficient to allow  $A$  to possess knowledge that  $p$  by deferring it to  $B$ . The question we must clarify then is how to pass from an initial asymmetrical distribution of epistemic perspectives to a successful outcome of achieving common knowledge. The strategy is to show how differences in epistemic perspectives, when recognized, become sources of epistemic authority.

## 5

I propose to model testimony analogously to how Margaret Gilbert explains collective actions, i.e. requiring the formation of plural subjects in these processes.<sup>2</sup> Plural subjects are bounded by joint commitments in which some rights and obligations are created among the parties. The basis of a plural subject is simply people acting together:

Two or more people are acting together (doing something together) if and only if (1) they are jointly committed to espousing as a body the appropriate goal; (2) they are fulfilling the behavioural conditions associated with the achievement of that goal; (3) their satisfaction of these conditions is motivated in each case by the existence of the joint commitment. (Gilbert 2006, p. 146)

The origin of a joint action is that the parties realize that they are involved in a common goal and that "each party express something to the others, something that is expressive of readiness to participate in the joint action" (Gilbert 2006, p. 146). And hence they are involved in joint commitments with the aim of fulfilling the joint action. The mechanism is the same for simple actions like walking together as for complex ones like constituting democracies: People espouse joint goals and thereby are subject to certain obligations and acquire certain rights to claim responsibilities from other parties when they fail to meet the commitments. By being involved in such joint commitments, the parties "gain a special standing with respect to other's actions" (p. 149). For example, when one fails in doing the expected actions, a sense of betrayal would be appropriate in the context of the standing that each party maintains regarding other's actions. Similarly, it would be appropriate a sense of trust. In fact, trust is a good indicator of a joint action. Thus, Gilbert observes that "if one acts contrary to a joint commitment one is answerable to all parties, as such, including oneself" (p. 152). To conclude, "the parties to a joint commitment are surely liable to feel that they owe each other conformity to the commitment" (p. 153).

---

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Gilbert has improved her model in the last years. See Gilbert 2000, and Gilbert 2006. We shall quote here this last work.

This approach models the social level in such a way that enables us to distinguish the proposal from the classical accounts of holism and individualism. Social groups involved in collective actions constitute plural subjects, and hence it is not necessary either to postulate any kind of common mind or reduce the social level to individual expectations. Testimony would be a case of joint action. In my view, testimony is a communicative action that would not be successfully performed without the parties espousing the common goal of preserving content and knowledge. The parties are bounded by certain obligations involved in the intercourse of asking for and giving information. The speaker is obliged to sincerity; the hearer is here obliged to take her words without biases or prejudices and not to commit an epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2003). In this final section I propose an analysis of how this common goal arises from an initial stage in which the parties have asymmetrical epistemic statuses. This proposal borrows some ideas from Richard Moran (Moran 2006) regarding the speaker's commitments, and some ideas from Bernard Williams (2002) regarding the necessity of some epistemic virtues as truthfulness in order to explain the stabilization of our social institutions. My point is that initial differences in epistemic perspectives lead to differences in epistemic authority.

Starting from an initial situation where  $A$  and  $B$  do not depend on each other, for instance because they share similar epistemic perspectives on  $p$  depending on  $e$  and their respective cognitive faculties, we can understand how a socio-epistemological level emerges in testimony. In this primitive scenery, if they declare "we know that  $p$ ", it is because they achieved to know that  $p$  depending on the same evidence  $e$ , and they mutually recognize their cognitive achievement of acquiring the knowledge that  $p$ . The situation becomes rather different when one goes to consult an expert about  $p$ . Then the agent  $A$  is in a state of epistemic penury with respect to  $B$ 's perspective on  $p$ . There is a gap here between  $A$  and the evidence  $e$  that could be filled only by consulting  $B$ . Consider a blind person in an airport asking someone for the time scheduled for his departing flight. He knows his epistemic penury. His first question concerns the perspective of the other person: "Can you see the hour of my departing flight?" Thus, the first step is getting to know if  $B$  constitutes or not an expert on  $p$  for him. In the exchange,  $B$  finds herself in a position of epistemic superiority about  $p$  and then she can enter into the game of sharing her knowledge or not. If it is the case that she pays attention to  $A$ 's demand, then both parties recognize that they are jointly committed to share knowledge and by this very fact some mutual obligations are created. Because  $A$  cannot have access to  $p$  without the help of  $B$  that possesses an evidence  $e$  that  $A$  lacks,  $A$  puts himself literally in the hands of  $B$  regarding  $p$ . If then  $B$  declares her condition of expert,  $A$  is entitled hereby to trust  $B$  to get the knowledge that  $p$ . So we are confronted with a social fact of sharing their mutual recognition of asymmetry and accepting the demands that a joint commitment create.

In the public space of deliberation, when  $A$  asks  $B$  for advice and  $B$  recognizes he is in a better epistemic perspective and in a disposition to satisfy  $A$ 's demand, he cannot react as any other speaker would do: now he has to be concerned with the situation in a new way. For, by avowing that  $p$  in answering  $A$ ,  $B$  is sharing knowledge with  $A$ . Moran (2006) analyses this act as being very similar to a promise.  $B$  is giving his

word to *A* about *p*, that is, he endorses his avowal, and the endorsing is based on his own epistemic capacities. *B* is not merely intending that *A* believes his words; *B* is assuring *A* that his words correspond to his knowledge and that he assures it at his best. *B* is sharing knowledge, not only beliefs. In this situation, cheating about *p* is very different from being mistaken about *p*. Errors might happen because our fragile constitution as epistemic agents, but cheating or breaking truthfulness could only happen when *B* is betraying her commitments in a scenario of consented testimony. *A* can feel then a sense of betrayal and she is entitled hence to claim *B* for an answer. This bond is created when *A* and *B* say something like the following:

A: "I wish you knew that I depend on your perspective on *p* for knowing that *p*, and that you (*B*) tell me whether *p* because of that dependence."

B: "I know that you depend on me for knowing that *p*, and thereby through my avowal I endorse *p*."

When someone is invested with the status of an expert, and when someone avows to other person her epistemic poverty and asks for an answer, some responsibilities are created by the recognition of the epistemic dependence and the disposition to overcome it. In this new scenario, the word of *B* is a sufficient reason for *A* to accept that *p*. And *A* will share the knowledge that *p* even if she does not share with him the evidence *e* for *p*. It is not possible for all of us to share the overall evidence of the thing we know, but this does not prevent us from knowing it. In the case of using artefacts or our own senses, we can reasonably rely on them even if we do not know how they work. In the case of social relations aimed at sharing knowledge, we can rely on others even if we do not have the same evidence. But in this case we must make sure that they have understood our situation of epistemic poverty and that they have intended to overcome it by offering us their knowledge and by supporting it with the exercise of their epistemic virtues.

To conclude, this account of testimony introduces some conditions that must be met by any model that regards the process of sharing knowledge as a social achievement: First, knowledge must exist. Therefore, we suppose that there are epistemic virtues that explain how *B* got his knowledge that *p*. Second, some mutual recognition of their respective epistemic perspectives must be involved in the situation. Third, both parties must assume their epistemic responsibilities in the process. It is only at this moment that the social process of sharing knowledge acquires some merit because of the mutual recognition the epistemic agents manifest. I have not addressed here the responsibilities that the hearer contracts in the course of the acceptance of testimony. I assume that Miranda Fricker's account (2003) about how to conduct a fair process of testimony is correct. My main point has been that a process of social recognition can add epistemological merit to testimony, and that the merit goes beyond the value explained by a merely instrumental conception. And it does so without postulating any common mind that intervenes in the generation of knowledge.

## REFERENCES

- Burge, T. (1993). "Content Preservation," *Philosophical Review* CII, 457-88.
- Coady, C.A.J. (1992). *Testimony. A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Craig, E. (1990). *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Faulkner, P. (2000). "The Social Character of Testimony," *The Journal of Philosophy* XCVII/11, 581-601.
- Fricker, E. (1994). "Against Gullibility," in Bimal Krishna Matilal and Arindam Chakrabarti (eds.), *Knowing from Words*. Boston: Kluwer.
- Fricker, M. (2003). "Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowledge", *Metaphilosophy* 34 (1-2), 154-73.
- Gilbert, M. (2000). *Sociality and Responsibility*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publ.
- (2006). *A Theory of Political Obligation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hardwig, John (1985). "Epistemic Dependence", *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXII/7, 335-49.
- (1991). "The Role of Trust in Knowledge", *The Journal of Philosophy* 88, 693-708.
- Kusch, M. (2002). *Knowledge by Agreement*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- McDowell, J. (1994). "Knowledge by Hearsay," in Bimal Krishna Matilal and Arindam Chakrabarti (eds.), *Knowing from Words*. Boston: Kluwer, pp. 195-224.
- Moran, R. (2006). "Getting Told and Being Believed", in Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Origg, G. (2004). "Is Trust an Epistemological Notion?", *Revue scientifique. Episteme* 1(1), 61-72.
- (2005). "What Does it Mean to Trust in Epistemic Authority?", on-line edition in <http://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/docs/Origg>.
- (2006). "Le sens des autres: l'ontogenèse de la confiance épistémique", on-line edition in <http://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/docs/Origg>.
- Tomasello, M (1999). *The cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. (2002). *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Fernando BRONCANO** is Professor of philosophy at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Among his publications, we find *Saber en condiciones. Epistemología para escépticos y materialistas* (Madrid: Antonio Machado, 2003) or "Capacidades metarrepresentacionales y conducta simbólica" in *Estudios de Psicología* (2004) 25/2, 183-203.

**ADDRESS:** Departamento de Humanidades. Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Calle Madrid, 126, Getafe 28903 Madrid. Spain. E-mail: Fernando.Broncano@uc3m.es.