

Preferring Non-Testimonial Belief is a Social Virtue

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Consider Goldbach's conjecture, on which the sum of every even integer is the sum of two primes. There's no proof of this, or of its negation, but it's generally assumed to be true, given that the conjecture holds for every integer that's ever been checked, up to some very large integers – up to 4×10^{17} , as of earlier this year. However, the integers that have been checked are only a finite subset of the infinity of integers, so the evidence in favor of the conjecture is, in that respect, weak. For this reason, it seems like no one knows whether Goldbach's conjecture is true. (And you might even think, and this seems right to me, that it would be unreasonable to *believe* that the Goldbach's conjecture is true, on this basis of our current evidence.)

Imagine now that it is announced that a proof has been discovered, one that proves either Goldbach's conjecture or its negation, but that the proof, and indeed the status of the conjecture, is being kept secret for security reasons. However, you've won a raffle, and the prize is that you get to know whether Goldbach's conjecture is true. But you're given a choice: you can either have *testimonial* knowledge that Goldbach's conjecture is true, or *non-testimonial* knowledge that Goldbach's conjecture is true. If you opt for the former, the mathematician who discovered the proof will tell you whether Goldbach's conjecture is true. If you opt for the latter, you'll be given a serum – an all-natural and gluten-free blend of vitamins that temporarily improves mathematical ability – which will enable you to articulate the proof and to appreciate the reasoning that it embodies. Which version of the prize would you choose?

I think that (at least) many of you would prefer the second version. Now you might worry that working through the proof will take more time and effort than just asking the mathematician, and on that basis opt for the first version of the prize. But we can imagine that the serum is so powerful that it makes working out the proof as quick and as easy as asking the mathematician. In that case, which version of the prize would you choose? I think that (at least) many of you would prefer the second version. And if that's what you would prefer, then you would manifest an other-things-being-equal preference for non-testimonial knowledge (to testimonial knowledge).

That said, I think that for many of you the time and effort of working through the proof wouldn't necessarily matter – you'd be willing to pay that cost for the sake of non-testimonial knowledge about whether Goldbach's conjecture is true. Imagine that your colleague, a mathematician, comes to your office with great news: she's discovered a proof that settles the question of Goldbach's conjecture, a copy of which she has in hand. Although your first reaction might be to ask which way the question is settled, many of you, I think, would also ask to see the proof – to see if you can understand it and thus come to appreciate the reasoning that it embodies. You would be willing, in other words, to pay the cost of such time and effort, for the sake of non-testimonial knowledge about whether Goldbach's conjecture is true. It would not matter that you already *know* whether Goldbach's conjecture is true (because your colleague told you, or because you glanced down to the end of the proof); you want *non-testimonial* knowledge, and you can only get this by working through the proof for yourself. In that case, you would manifest a stronger preference for non-testimonial knowledge (to testimonial knowledge) – stronger, that is, than the other-things-being-equal preference described above. Even when things are not equal – e.g. when there are costs associated with non-testimonial knowledge – you prefer non-testimonial knowledge.

This paper is about such a preference, whether strong or merely other-things-being-equal. For reasons that will become clear, I am here going to focus on the preference for non-testimonial

belief (to testimonial belief), rather than on the preference for non-testimonial *knowledge* (to testimonial knowledge). In as much as knowledge is a species of belief, a preference for non-testimonial belief entails a preference for non-testimonial knowledge, and it seems to me that our preference for non-testimonial belief is more fundamental than our preference for non-testimonial knowledge, in that the former explains the latter. But, in any event, our focus in what follows will be on non-testimonial belief.

I think that a preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief) is common – many people have such a preference. I also think that such a preference was what Kant is going crazy about in his famous essay on enlightenment:

*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!*¹

But my interest here is with the phenomenon of preferring non-testimonial belief, and not with Kant's views (if he had any) about said phenomenon. In particular, I want to know: can the preference for non-testimonial belief, which (at least) many of us have, be justified? I shall approach this question by attempting to answer a slightly different question: is this preference for non-testimonial belief valuable, and, if it is, what explains its value?

In the last twenty years, epistemology has seen a surge of sympathetic interest in testimony as a source of knowledge (cf., for example, Burge 1993, Coady 1994, Matilal and Chakrabarti 1994, Lackey and Sosa 2006, Lackey 2008, Goldberg 2010). We are by now familiar with the often-repeated truism that “[m]ost of what we know we learned from the spoken or written word of others.” (Fricker 2006a, p. 592) We are urged to abandon “epistemic individualism” and the ideal of the “autonomous knower,” in favor of “social epistemology” (cf. Coady 1994, Schmitt 1994, Goldberg 2010). Considered alongside Kant's rhetoric of maturity and courage, a preference for non-testimonial belief can look like a symptom of a ridiculous 19th-century ethic of manliness. In this connection, you might think that preferring non-testimonial belief is a manifestation of vicious selfishness, individualism (cf. Coady 1994, p. 13 and passim), egotism (Foley 2001, p. 86 and passim), or egoism (cf. Zagzebski 2007, 2012, pp. 52-5). I shall argue, in opposition to this, that preferring non-testimonial belief is a social virtue – a character trait that benefits the possessor's society.

I'll articulate a conception of virtues as valuable character traits (§1), describe preferring non-testimonial belief as a character trait (§2), criticize some unsuccessful accounts of the relative value of non-testimonial belief (§3), and defend an account of the relative value of non-testimonial belief that appeals to the values of electoral reliability and electoral legitimacy (§4). This will leave untouched the issue of the disvalue of preferring non-testimonial belief, which I'll briefly address in conclusion (§5).

1 Virtues as valuable character traits

I'll argue that preferring non-testimonial belief is a social virtue. What's a virtue? To call something a virtue is – roughly – to do two things. First, it is to presuppose that thing is a

¹ H.B. Nisbet's translation from Kant 1991, p. 54.

character trait. Second, it is to say that that thing is valuable. So a virtue is – again, roughly – a **valuable character trait**.

This is a simple sketch, but more sophisticated accounts jibe with this basic idea. When it comes to what is presupposed when we call something a virtue, we confront questions about the **ontology of virtue**: what sort of a thing is a virtue? I said that a virtue is a character trait, but you might want to require more: that said trait is acquired by habituation rather than being innate, that manifestations of said trait are under the intelligent guidance of *phronesis*, that said trait is a mean between two vicious extremes, and so on. I'll stick with the minimal conception of the ontology of virtue – that a virtue is a character trait – in what follows, but nothing will ride on this.

When it comes to the **value of virtue**, things are more complicated. I shall adopt a **pluralistic** and **permissive conception** of the value of virtue: a virtue is a character trait that is pro tanto valuable in some way. (Something is **pro tanto** valuable when it really is valuable, even when its value is trumped; compare something that is **prima facie** valuable, i.e. apparently, but perhaps not really, valuable.) This conception is permissive in that pro tanto value is sufficient for a character trait to be a virtue, and pluralistic in that there is no restriction placed on the way in which said trait must be valuable. Compare a conception on which “[a] virtue is a character trait a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well.” (Hursthouse 1999, p. 167) This **eudaimonist conception** of the value of virtue is not pluralistic, since it requires contribution to a particular good – the eudaimonia of the possessor – for a character trait to be a virtue. And it is not permissive, since it requires that such a trait be *necessary* for the existence of that good for that trait to be a virtue.

That’s what I mean by a virtue. I’ll argue that preferring non-testimonial belief is a social virtue. So what’s a social virtue? I have in mind here virtues whose value is explained by appeal to the wellbeing of the possessor’s society. I don’t have any fancy sense of “society” in mind here, just the people and institutions that compose what we would ordinarily call “society.” And I don’t have any particular account of social wellbeing in mind, just the intuitive idea of things going well for a society, whether this involves things going well for its members, or for its members considered as a group, or for their social institutions. I am, however, assuming that social wellbeing really is valuable. Given this assumption, a **social virtue** is a character trait that tends to (pro tanto) benefit the possessor’s society.

2 Preferring non-testimonial belief as a character trait

If preferring non-testimonial belief is a social virtue, then, given my conception of virtues as valuable character traits (§1), preferring non-testimonial belief is a character trait. What I mean by this, more exactly, is that I will use “preferring non-testimonial belief” as a name for a particular character trait. It’s that character trait that I claim is a social virtue. In this section I’ll characterize the relevant trait (§2.1), characterize testimonial belief (§2.2), and make an important assumption (§2.3).

2.1 Preferring non-testimonial belief

Character traits, I am going to assume, consist of dispositions to think, act, and feel. I don’t mean to say that a character trait just is such a disposition, although you might adopt that view.²

² Consider, for example, a callous miser who, under the influence of alcohol, is momentarily disposed to give aid to the unfortunate, out of sincere concern for their wellbeing. You might want to say that such a miser does not, even at that moment, possess the character trait of

But character traits can be individuated by the dispositions of which they consist. And **preferences** are dispositions to think, act, and feel: a preference for x (to y) is a disposition to choose x (over y), to seek x (rather than y), to enjoy x (more so than y), and so on. So we can understand **the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief** (or “preferring non-testimonial belief,” for short) as the character trait that consists of a preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief). Four comments of clarification.

First, note that **preference comes in degrees**. The least degree of preference, or weakest preference, is an other-things-being-equal preference; the greatest degree of preference, or strongest preference, is no-matter-what preference. We can thus speak of possessing the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief to varying degrees. Consider the case involving Goldbach’s conjecture that was described above. Imagine that, whilst ignorant of whether the conjecture is true, you prefer the serum to the testimony of the mathematician, but that, were you to acquire testimonial knowledge about whether the conjecture is true, you would have no interest in the mathematician’s proof. You seem to possess the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief to a lesser degree than someone who would still want to understand the mathematician’s proof, even though she already has testimonial knowledge about whether the conjecture is true. Nothing I’ll say here will ride on the fact that the possession of the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief comes in degrees. We can assume, in what follows, that we are talking about possessing that character trait to the least degree, i.e. about an other-things-being-equal preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief).

Second, note that the **testimonialness of belief comes in degrees**. Compare two cases:

- (i) Sight-unseen, you believe that my dog is a Labrador, on the basis of my telling you that she is a Labrador.
- (ii) You meet my dog and suspect that she is a Labrador, and I confirm this when you ask.

Your belief, in both cases, seems testimonial, but it seems *more* testimonial in case (i) than in case (ii). I spoke above of “a preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief).” But this was ambiguous. This could mean a preference for belief that is maximally non-testimonial – i.e. non-testimonial to the highest degree – to belief that is maximally testimonial. But it could also mean a preference for belief that is less testimonial, to belief that is more testimonial, i.e. a preference for belief that is testimonial to degree n , to belief that is testimonial to degree m , where $n < m$. Imagine that someone says that she prefers whiskey to wine. This would normally mean that she prefers a drink containing 100% whiskey to a drink containing 100% wine, and not that she prefers any drink with more whiskey to any drink with less whiskey (e.g. a disgusting 40/60 mix of whiskey to wine, to a simple glass of wine). But when it comes to the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief, we should adopt the latter meaning: the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief is the character trait that consists of a preference for belief that is testimonial to degree n , to belief that is testimonial to degree m , where $n < m$.

Third, the present conception of preferring non-testimonial belief is **thin** by contrast with the **thick** Aristotelian notion of the character trait that consists of a disposition to choose, seek, and enjoy non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief) **at the right time and in the right way**. There is nothing wrong with such a notion, of course – it’s just a notion, after all, so what could be wrong with it? – but there are questions we can ask using my notion that cannot be asked

generosity, on the grounds that the dispositions of which a character trait consists must be temporally and modally stable. See Doris, p. 22, Miller, *Character: An Empirical Perspective*.

using the Aristotelian notion. In particular, we can ask whether preferring non-testimonial belief is valuable.

Fourth, when I say “a preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief),” I mean a preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief) **in general**. This preference is different from a preference for non-testimonial belief in a particular domains, such as morality or aesthetics. My issue here is orthogonal, although obviously related, to debates about the distinctive status of moral testimony (Anscombe 1962, Coady 1994, pp. 69-75, Fricker 2006, pp. 237-9, Hopkins 2007, Hills 2009, Zagzebski 2012, Chapter 8, Howell [forthcoming](#)) and aesthetic testimony (Meskin 2004, Hopkins 2011).

I have chosen the clumsy name “preferring non-testimonial belief” carefully. I might have chosen other names, including “**intellectual autonomy**” (cf. Fricker 2006), “**intellectual self-reliance**” (cf. Zagzebski 2012, p. 4-18, pp. 117-9), “**intellectual independence**,” and “**intellectual individualism**.” There are problems with all of these alternatives. First, “autonomy” (and perhaps “independence”) has a thick Aristotelian sense (Roberts and Wood 2007, Chapter 10), on which it would not be coherent to ask whether autonomy is valuable. Second, you might think that autonomy, self-reliance, and independence have nothing to do with a preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief), because testimonial belief, no less than non-testimonial belief, is compatible with autonomy (Roberts and Wood 2007, pp. 270-80, Zagzebski 2012, pp. 166-70, pp. 247-51, Howell [forthcoming, section on “Autonomy”](#)), self-reliance (cf. Zagzebski 2012, p. 8), and independence – in virtue of the fact that in testimony the hearer can be perfectly free and self-governing in her deference.³ Third, “individualism” is sometimes used as the name for an epistemological view (Schmitt 1994, p. 4 and *passim*, Goldberg 2010, p. 10 and *passim*).

2.2 What is testimonial belief?

A definition of testimony would be controversial, but here’s a paradigm case: you ask a co-worker, “For what time is the staff meeting scheduled?,” she says, “For tomorrow at two o’clock,” and you believe, on that basis, that the staff meeting is scheduled for tomorrow at two o’clock. In this paradigm case, someone (call her “the speaker”) asserts that *p*, and you (“the hearer”) believe, on that basis, that *p*.⁴ This isn’t to say that your basis is exhausted by the fact that the someone asserted that *p*, although you might adopt that view. You might think that your basis includes an item of “background knowledge” to the effect that people’s assertions (or their assertions about the topic to which the proposition that *p* belongs) tend to be true. You might think that your basis includes the fact that such-and-such particular person, i.e. the speaker, asserted that *p*, along with an item of “background knowledge” to the effect that the speaker’s assertions (or her assertions about the topic to which the proposition that *p* belongs) tend to be true. As well, that a belief of yours is testimonial does not mean that you do not

³ Autonomy, in this sense, is self-rule (cf. Roberts and Wood 2007, p. 259), and intellectual autonomy could be understood as control or authority over one’s beliefs. In another (related) sense, autonomy is self-endorsement or “wholeheartedness” (cf. Frankfurt 1988, 1994); in this connection intellectual autonomy could be understood as the ability to “reflectively certify the epistemic credentials of all that [one] knows or justifiably believes.” (Goldberg 2010, p. 7)

⁴ When it comes to the labels “speaker” and “hearer,” bear in mind the ubiquity of written testimony, as well as the possibility of non-linguistic testimony (e.g. through gesture). When it comes to assertion, bear in the mind that we might appeal to a narrower category (e.g. telling) or to a broader category (e.g. saying).

manifest certain **testimonial virtues** in forming and sustaining that belief.⁵ I have in mind (cf. Fricker 1994, pp. 135-5, pp. 148-51, 1995, pp. 404-8, p. 409, Lackey 2008, pp. 160-4, pp. 178-85):

- A sensitivity to evidence of sincerity or insincerity on the part of the speaker, e.g. that she has a motive to lie, that she appears nervous, etc.
- A sensitivity to the plausibility or implausibility of what the speaker asserts, e.g. that it contradicts something you know first-hand to be false, etc.
- A disposition to select reliable sources of testimony, e.g. to ask particular speakers questions about particular topics, to believe on the basis of the testimony of particular speakers on particular topics, etc.

The manifestation of these virtues would not undermine the status of your belief as testimonial. Indeed, I shall assume that these virtues typically are manifested in testimonial belief formation (§3.5, §3.6). Even provided that our testimonial beliefs typically amount to knowledge, this assumption, it seems to me, is neutral on the debate between reductionists and anti-reductionists in the epistemology of testimony (cf. Burge 1993, Fricker 1994, 1995, 2006a, Coady 1994, Audi 1997, Lipton 1998, Lackey 2008, Chapters 5 – 6). If it isn't, so be it.

In any event, I shall not attempt a definition of testimony – the paradigm case gives us a clear enough conception to proceed. I shall speak both of **testimonial belief** and of a person's belief being **based on the testimony of** another person. Three negative characterizations will provide further clarity.

First, testimonial belief is distinct from **deferential belief**, i.e. belief that p based on the fact that someone (else)⁶ believes that p. An example: on the basis of the fact that your more experienced colleagues are entering a certain building at mealtime, you might conclude that that building is the mess hall – your colleagues are hungry, and they are entering such-and-such building, which they must therefore think is the mess hall, and which therefore surely is the mess hall. But this is not an instance of testimonial belief.⁷ It is controversial whether testimonial belief is a species of deferential belief, but, in any event, there are cases of deferential belief that are not cases of testimonial belief.

Second, testimonial belief is distinct from **belief based on utterance**. Some examples: after seeing and hearing Bertha say, "Schnee ist Weiss," you might believe that Bertha asserted that snow is white, that Bertha speaks German, that she has a soprano voice, or that she is capable of speech. None of these are instances of testimonial belief, even though (at least) some cases of testimonial belief are cases of belief based on utterance.

Third, testimonial belief is distinct from **socially dependent belief**. An example: you must stand on your friends shoulders to see over the fence, but from this vantage point you can see that the Dodgers have the lead. Your belief, in an obvious sense, is dependent on your friend's help. Another example: you believe that the Higgs boson exists, but you possess the concept of the Higgs boson only in virtue of being causally related to certain physicists, whose thoughts

⁵ I focus here on virtues manifested by the hearer (which we could call **hearer virtues**); under the label "testimonial virtues" we should also include virtues manifested by the speaker (i.e. **speaker virtues**).

⁶ This distinguishes deferential belief from conservative belief, i.e. belief that p based on the fact that you believe that p.

⁷ Although it's controversial where to draw the boundary between this case and cases of testimony; consider cases of overheard soliloquy.

about and involving this concept determine its content. Your belief, in an obvious sense, is dependent on your being so related to the physicists. Another example: you believe that the Prime Minister has not been assassinated, because if she had been assassinated, you'd have heard about it by now (Goldberg 2010, Chapter 6). Your belief, in an obvious sense, is dependent on your being embedded, in the right way, in a social environment that includes reliable and public reportage concerning the fate of the Prime Minister. Testimonial belief, however, is a species of socially dependent belief.⁸

2.3 An assumption

I claim that the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief is a virtue, which means (§1) that it is a valuable character trait. I'll now make an important, but I think very plausible, **assumption**: preferring non-testimonial belief is (pro tanto) valuable because non-testimonial belief is (pro tanto) better than testimonial belief. It seems to me that preferring x (to y) tends to bring it about that you acquire x (rather than y). Preference is causally conducive to acquisition, and thus preferences are valuable as means to the end of acquiring that which is preferred, on the assumption that that which is preferred is valuable.⁹ But in any event, I am going to assume that preferring non-testimonial belief is valuable because non-testimonial belief is relatively valuable.¹⁰

3 Unsuccessful accounts of the value of non-testimonial belief

To explain the (pro tanto) value of the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief, therefore, we must explain why non-testimonial belief is (pro tanto) better than testimonial belief. We are thus looking for a **disparity** between non-testimonial belief and testimonial belief. In this section I'll criticize some unsuccessful accounts of the relative value of non-testimonial belief, and in the next (§4) I'll articulate and defend my own preferred account.

The accounts criticized here are all **selfish accounts** of the value of non-testimonial belief, in the following sense: they explain the value of non-testimonial belief in terms of its benefits for the believer. By contrast, my account (§4) will explain the value of non-testimonial belief in terms of its benefits for believer's society. In any event, it seems to me that the accounts criticized here, even if they were successful, would not be able to combat the charge of selfishness, mentioned at the outset, which can be raised against preferring non-testimonial belief.

3.1 Testimonial belief is relatively unreliable

You might argue that testimonial belief is less reliable than non-testimonial belief. The "reliability" of a belief is down to the reliability of its source, so the thought here is that testimony is a less reliable source of belief than non-testimonial sources, such as sense

⁸ N.b. that my defense of the value of non-testimonial belief (§4) does not imply the value of non-socially-dependent belief (in general).

⁹ There is an alternative approach to the value of preferences (cf. Moore, Hurka 2001, Chapter 1), on which preferring x to y is sometimes a fitting response to the fact that x is better than y . Preferences are valuable not in virtue of what they cause, but in virtue of their intrinsic appropriateness, given the value of their objects. It would require some tweaking elsewhere to combine this approach with my defense of preferring non-testimonial belief as a social virtue.

¹⁰ This is in tension with an approach suggested by Linda Zagzebski (1996, pp. 202-11), who argues that the value of curiosity – a desire for knowledge – explains the value of knowledge, rather than the value of knowledge explaining the value of curiosity.

perception, introspection, or inference to the best explanation. Non-testimonial beliefs, so the argument goes, are more likely than testimonial beliefs to be true.

However, no general claim of this kind is plausible. Some non-testimonial sources (in some situations, when it comes to some topics) are highly reliable, but others are not especially reliable, and others are downright unreliable. And some testimonial sources (in some situations, when it comes to some topics) are downright unreliable, but others are rather reliable, and some are highly reliable.

Elizabeth Fricker (2006b) suggests the relative riskiness of testimonial belief, writing that “there are many motives for deceit,” and so “[e]ach link in a chain of testimonial transmission incurs its own risk of error.” (p. 242; cf. Lackey 2008, pp. 189-90) But this does not support a disparity between testimonial belief and non-testimonial belief. Just as there are many motives for deceit, there are many motives for self-deception, wishful thinking, and bias. Testimonial belief runs a risk in virtue of the fact that the speaker may have reason to lie to me; introspective belief runs a risk in virtue of the fact that I may have reason to lie to myself. The existence of a “chain” of risky links is not distinctive of testimony: think of beliefs based on inductive and deductive reasoning, or beliefs based on memory. Fricker writes that “[a]long with the epistemic dependence on other comes a no less risky practical dependence on them.” (Ibid.) But we are practically vulnerable to falsehood in our non-testimonial beliefs just as much in our testimonial beliefs. Finally, she argues that “epistemic dependence on others ... lessens one’s ability rationally to police one’s belief system for falsity.” (Ibid) But just as we are not competent to evaluate the reasoning of experts, which we rely on when we take their word, we are not competent to evaluate the workings of our own faculties of perception, memory, and intuitive judgment. Just as we cannot (in general) examine the causal origins of the testimonial chains that lead to our testimonial beliefs, we cannot (in general) examine the causal origins of the non-testimonial chains that lead to our non-testimonial beliefs. Only in the unusual case of a conscious, deliberate inference are we in a position to bring such a chain before our minds and submit it to scrutiny.

Even fans of the reliability of testimony sometimes underestimate the lack of disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief, when it comes to their reliability. Jennifer Lackey (2008) argues that “perception, like other non-testimonial sources, is fairly *homogenous*,” such that we “do not need to be very discriminating in order to be reliably in touch with the truth” when using non-testimonial sources (p. 191). She argues that “testimony is quite unlike other sources of belief precisely because it is so wildly *heterogeneous*,” and that this “requires subjects to be much more discriminating when accepting testimony than when trusting, say, sense perception.” (p. 192) I’m skeptical of a real disparity here. Indeed, testimony is a heterogeneous source, but so are non-testimonial sources. In our beliefs about ourselves we must contend with wishful thinking and self-deception, in our beliefs about other people we must contend with racism, sexism, and homophobia, in our perceptual beliefs we must contend with illusions, both atypical (e.g. mirages) and systematic (e.g. the presentation of colors as qualitative properties of bodies), and in our memorial beliefs – well, the unreliability of memory is a literary cliché. We need to be just as vigilant when depending on non-testimonial sources as we need to be when depending on testimony.¹¹

¹¹ Some (Foley 2001, pp. 99-108, Zagzebski 2007, pp. 253-4, Zagzebski 2012, pp. 55-60) argue against the idea that testimony is less reliable than non-testimonial sources on the grounds that this idea commits you to the absurd (and supposedly “incoherent”) view that your faculties are more reliable than those of other people. This would be another reason to reject the idea of a disparity in reliability between testimonial and non-testimonial belief.

3.2 Testimonial belief never amounts to knowledge

The idea that testimony cannot be a source of knowledge appears in Plato's *Theaetetus* (201b-c), Locke's *Essays concerning Human Understanding* (Book I, Chapter III, Section 24; cf. *On the Conduct of the Understanding*, §24), and Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* ("Rule Three," AT 366). This idea, and the corresponding idea that testimonial belief never amounts to knowledge, is relevant to the present inquiry only if there are non-testimonial sources of knowledge, and only if non-testimonial beliefs sometimes amount to knowledge. However, I am going to follow contemporary orthodoxy, and assume that there is no such disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief, because, so it seems to me, the same anti-skeptical strategies that vindicate the possibility of non-testimonial knowledge can be applied to vindicate the possibility of testimonial knowledge.

3.3 Testimonial belief never amounts to certainty

I said that the idea that testimony cannot be a source of knowledge appears in Descartes' *Rules* (§3.2). What he says, in Latin, is that testimony cannot be a source of "scientia," which he earlier defines as "certain and evident cognition." ("Rule Two," AT 362)¹² So perhaps Descartes' idea is just that testimonial belief never amounts to certainty – which we might understand as a status distinct from knowledge – whereas non-testimonial belief sometimes does. This is plausible only given an epistemic, and not a psychological, sense of "certainty," on which, if S is **certain** that p, then her epistemic position with respect to the proposition that p could not possibly be better. Is non-testimonial certainty possible? Consider simple logical and mathematical propositions (e.g. that $2+2=4$) or, as G.E. Moore would argue, obvious contingent truths (e.g. that I am in my office right now). My epistemic position with respect to these propositions could not possibly be better, modulo worries about demon deception. Is testimonial certainty, then, impossible? I think not. Suppose my oldest and most trustworthy friend, Rufus, who has no reason to be insincere, swears on his life that he has a headache. Suppose that he even has positive reason to be sincere: he has just taken a courtroom oath to tell the truth. "I have a headache, Hazlett, I can't testify – do something to get me out of here!" As in the case of my certainty that $2+2=4$ or my certainty that I am in my office right now, there are skeptical doubts that could be raised – perhaps Rufus is lying after all; perhaps he is a phenomenal zombie; perhaps I am deceived by a malicious demon about the existence of Rufus. But, modulo these worries, my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that Rufus has a headache could not possibly be better. (Should I inspect his brain to see if his C-fibers are firing? But suppose that they weren't firing – the sane thing to conclude would be that headaches can occur without C-fibers firing!) So it seems that I can be certain that Rufus has a headache, on this basis of his testimony. There is, therefore, no disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief, when it comes to certainty.

3.4 Non-testimonial knowledge entails acquaintance

In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, it is suggested that the title character, a polymath whose extensive knowledge has been acquired through scholastic study, lacks valuable life experience. He knows a lot about romance, for example, but he has never been in love. Will, despite having a lot of knowledge, lacks something – and you might think that this lack is related to the fact that so much of his knowledge is testimonial knowledge. You might argue that the relative value of non-testimonial belief is on display here, and that this value is what Will is missing. But what is it about non-testimonial knowledge that explains why Will's lack of non-testimonial knowledge is a bad thing? The most promising way of answering this question appeals to the value of

¹² From Dugald Murdoch's translation in Descartes 1985, p. 10.

acquaintance. Non-testimonial belief, if all goes well, amounts to non-testimonial knowledge, and non-testimonial knowledge (that p) entails acquaintance (with the fact that p). No such claim is true of testimonial knowledge, and this explains why non-testimonial belief is better than testimonial belief. Two objections to this argument.

First, the premise that non-testimonial knowledge entails acquaintance is false. Even setting aside the case of a priori knowledge, where it is obscure what acquaintance with the facts would be, there are non-testimonial sources of knowledge such that acquaintance is not entailed by knowledge, such as inference to the best explanation. Indeed, the whole point of inference to the best explanation seems to be to take us from knowledge of phenomena with which we are acquainted to knowledge of phenomena with which we aren't acquainted. So there is no disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief here: some non-testimonial sources involve acquaintance, but others don't.

Second, the value of acquaintance is obscure. Will Hunting lacks acquaintance, but the appeal of the acquaintance he lacks is peculiar to the specific things with which he is not acquainted. It's fun to be acquainted with the facts about romance, but no fun to be acquainted with the facts about torture. We would need some value always or generally enjoyed by acquaintance, to explain the relative value of non-testimonial belief.¹³

3.5 Non-testimonial knowledge is a greater achievement than testimonial knowledge

Recall Henry's speech on St. Crispin's Day, and in particular his argument on the supposition that the English are fated to win their upcoming battle: do not wish for reinforcements on that hypothesis, for "[t]he fewer men, the greater share of honour."¹⁴ Such honors are not arbitrarily bestowed: victory with a smaller force seems more impressive than victory with a larger force. You might thus argue that the achievement of a given success by a smaller group is a greater achievement – a more valuable achievement, one more worthy of praise or admiration or respect – than the achievement of that same success by a larger group.¹⁵ Of course, Henry's argument is a howler. He ought to wait for reinforcements. But that's beside the point I'm trying to make. The value he identifies – that victory at a five-to-one disadvantage is a greater achievement than victory at a three-to-one advantage – seems real. Here, then, is **Henry's principle**: the achievement of x by a smaller group is (pro tanto) better than the achievement of x by a larger group.

On the basis of Henry's principle, you might offer the following account of the value of non-testimonial knowledge. Virtue epistemologists understand knowledge as a species of achievement, namely, the achievement of true belief (Zagzebski 1996, Riggs 2002, Sosa 2007, Greco 2010). Non-testimonial belief, if all goes well, amounts to non-testimonial knowledge, and non-testimonial knowledge, so the argument goes, is an **individual achievement**: the achievement of true belief by a single person. Testimonial belief, if all goes well, amounts to testimonial knowledge, and testimonial knowledge is a **group achievement** – the achievement

¹³ You might argue that acquaintance is a species of accuracy or "cognitive contact with reality" (Roberts and Wood 2007, p. 33, pp. 50-5), and therefore valuable in virtue of the fact that accuracy is always or generally valuable. I won't pursue this idea here; my first objection to the present proposal suffices to undermine this as an account of the relative value of non-testimonial belief.

¹⁴ *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 3.

¹⁵ This assumes that we can make sense of the idea of the *same* success being achieved by groups of different sizes. It requires, in other words, the individuation of successes without reference to the number of people who achieve them.

of true belief by at least two people. Given Henry's principle, non-testimonial knowledge (that p) is pro tanto better than testimonial knowledge (that p).¹⁶ This explains why non-testimonial belief is better than testimonial belief

Zagzebski (2007) would object that the person who chooses individual intellectual achievement over group intellectual achievement "is valuing her own powers more than the truth." (p. 257) Suppose this is right: what of it? Surely true belief is not an overriding value, or the only valuable thing. Appreciating the value of individual achievement doesn't preclude caring about true belief (cf. p. 256). If we cared *only* about true belief, of course, then considerations of individual achievement would not move us. But, likewise, if we cared only about individual achievement, then considerations of true belief would not move us. Most of us, I think, care about both (cf. Zagzebski 2012, pp. 117-9).

The idea that non-testimonial knowledge is a greater achievement than testimonial knowledge forms the basis for an objection to the view that knowledge is a species of achievement (Lackey 2007): testimonial knowledge is not an achievement; therefore, knowledge is not a species of achievement. But any disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial knowledge would be sufficient to motivate the present account of the relative value of non-testimonial belief.

The problem with the present account is that Henry's principle is false. To see why, consider the question of why it seems like the achievement of a given success by a smaller group is a greater achievement than the achievement of that same success by a larger group. The reason this seems plausible, I think, is that it seems like the achievement of a given success by a smaller group is more **difficult** than the achievement of that same success by a larger group. This seems right when it comes to the case of victory in the sort of battle that Henry is considering, but it isn't true in general. Sometimes the achievement of a given success by a smaller group is easier than the achievement of that same success by a larger group. Consider, for example, a cat burglary, in which a larger group of burglars would make success more difficult, or a conspiracy, whose success becomes increasingly difficult as more people become involved.¹⁷ This point applies to testimonial and non-testimonial knowledge, as well. Testimonial knowledge is sometimes more difficult to acquire than non-testimonial knowledge. This happens when testimonial knowledge is elusive – e.g. when available sources of testimony are difficult to understand or to interpret, as in the case of an obscure guru who speaks an unfamiliar language – and when non-testimonial knowledge is easy to acquire – e.g. when available non-testimonial sources are easy to access, as in the case of perceiving our immediate environment, or doing simple arithmetic. It can seem like testimonial knowledge is acquired more easily than non-testimonial knowledge because the situations in which people normally seek out testimonial knowledge are situations in which non-testimonial knowledge is difficult to acquire. But this is not true in general.

The present proposal can seem attractive when testimonial belief formation is assumed to be passive, by contrast with non-testimonial belief formation. But there is no disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief formation, when it comes to their activity or passivity. First, we need to keep in mind the testimonial virtues described above (§2.2), which are typically manifested in testimonial belief (cf. Riggs 2009, pp. 208-15, Greco 2010, pp. 80-4). Second, although testimonial belief formation is sometimes relatively passive (think of how you absorb information while casually and half-attentively listening to a news program on the radio), non-

¹⁶ Note that this premise is consistent with the existence of cases in which testimonial belief that p is a greater achievement than non-testimonial belief that q.

¹⁷ These cases cannot, I think, be written off as exceptions to the rule that the achievement of a given success by a smaller group is generally more difficult than the achievement of that same success by a larger group.

testimonial belief is also sometimes relatively passive (think of how you absorb information about your periphery in sense perception), and testimonial belief is sometimes relatively active (think of historical inquiry, in search of difficult to find, and even more difficult to interpret, reliable first-hand accounts of some past event).

In any event, Henry's principle is false, and so the present account of the relative value of non-testimonial belief will not work.

This line of criticism can also be applied to the idea that non-testimonial belief formation, but not testimonial belief formation, is conducive to the **development of intellectual virtue**. You might argue that non-testimonial belief formation involves the exercise of our cognitive faculties or intellectual abilities, whereas testimonial belief formation merely involves deference to someone else's faculties or abilities. The acquisition of intellectual virtue requires practice and habituation, which is evaded in testimonial belief formation (cf. Hills 2009, pp. , Howell, forthcoming). But this argument ignores the testimonial virtues described above (§2.2). Non-testimonial belief formation involves the exercise of some of our cognitive faculties and intellectual abilities, but others are not exercised – our sensitivity to signs of insincerity, for example, or our ability to find a reliable informant in a community full of frauds. Just as we need practice at reasoning, if we are to become clear thinkers, we need practice at deferring, if we are to become wise recipients of testimony. Testimonial belief formation may be counter-conducive to the development of **non-testimonial virtues**, but this leaves open the question of whether and to what extent we should prefer the development of those virtues, to the development of the testimonial virtues, and thus leaves open the question of the relative value of non-testimonial belief.

3.6 Testimonial belief never amounts to understanding

You might argue that testimony cannot be a source of understanding.¹⁸ In connection with this idea, it is sometimes pointed out that testimonial belief that p is insufficient for understanding why p (Hills 2009, p. 100; cf. Hopkins 2007, pp. 629-31, Zagzebski 2012, pp. 174-5) – or **explanatory understanding**. But this does not suggest a disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief, because this is simply a consequence of the fact that, in general, belief that p is insufficient for understanding why p. Testimonial belief that p will not get you any closer to understanding why p, but neither will perceptual belief that p. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, when it comes to testimonial knowledge that p. And, for the same reason, the question of whether explanatory understanding is a species of knowledge is a red herring in connection with the value of non-testimonial belief (cf. Hills 2009, pp. 100). It is often said that no amount of propositional knowledge is sufficient for explanatory understanding, because the latter requires a non-doxastic grasp of explanatory, causal, modal, or logical connections (Zagzebski 2001, pp. , 2012, p. 175, Kvanvig 2003, pp. , Grimm 2006, pp. 532-3, forthcoming,

¹⁸ You might think this is what Plato has in mind in the passage from the *Theaetetus* (201-bc), which I mentioned above (§3.2), but the evidence for this is unclear. In that passage, he uses both οἶδα, which means to know (and which is related etymologically to εἶδον, which means to see), and ἐπιστάμαι, which can mean (according to Liddell) “to know how to do, to be able to do, capable of doing” or “to understand a matter, know, be versed in or acquainted with,” among other (related) meanings. Translating ἐπιστήμη with “understanding” in this passage is a possibility, but ἐπιστήμη can also mean “acquaintance with a matter, skill, experience,” which would be a natural translation given the context, in which knowing about some event on the basis of the testimony of an eyewitness is contrasted with actually being an eyewitness to that event.

Hills 2009, p. 100-1; cf. Hopkins 2007, pp. 633).¹⁹ In the same way that knowledge that *p* requires a representation of the truth of the proposition that *p*, in the form of a belief that *p*, understanding why *p* requires a representation of the explanation of the fact that *p*. Propositional knowledge is a species of belief, and explanatory understanding is a species of such representation. Thus we must set aside questions about the relationship between propositional knowledge and explanatory understanding: for the reasons given above they are orthogonal to our present inquiry.²⁰

This point notwithstanding, you might think that that **testimonial (explanatory) understanding is impossible** (Zagzebski 2007, p. 260, Roberts and Wood 2007, p 261-6; cf. Hopkins 2007, p. 630). Theorists of understanding often appeal to cases in which testimony fails to deliver understanding (Grimm 2006, pp. 531-2, Pritchard 2010, pp. 82-3). And so you might argue: testimonial understanding is impossible, therefore non-testimonial belief is better than testimonial belief. However, the premise of this argument doesn't support its conclusion. Testimonial belief that *p* doesn't preclude understanding why *p*, nor does it interfere with or otherwise problematize the acquisition of such understanding. Alison Hills (2006) says that there is "a tension between forming moral beliefs on the basis of moral understanding and forming them on the basis of testimony." (p. 119) Her argument for this supposed tension runs as follows: "[t]o act well on the basis of moral beliefs ... you need to use [moral understanding] to form your moral beliefs," but "[t]rusting testimony is a rival basis for your belief," since "it could make it less likely that your belief is grounded in the right way." (p. 122) There are two problems with Hills' argument. First, doxastic bases do not compete as "rivals," in the way that Hills suggests. Belief can be based on a plurality of evidential sources, and the fact that a belief is based on one source does not preclude its also being based on another. Second, believing that *p* on the basis of testimony doesn't, in general, make it less likely that you come to believe that *p* on some non-testimonial basis (and perhaps abandon your testimonial basis as a result). Testimonial belief doesn't preclude the quest for non-testimonial belief, so long as you want to acquire the latter. Indeed, testimonial belief that *p* can inspire the quest for non-testimonial belief that *p* (as when you want to see something surprising for yourself), and it can enable the acquisition of non-testimonial belief that *p* (as when an expert sets you on the right course in your investigation). In particular cases we want to acquire non-testimonial belief: available testimonial sources might not provide evidence strong enough for our purposes, we might want to have non-testimonial reasons in defense of our belief, we might want to see something with our own eyes. The desire for non-testimonial belief might be absent in some cases – suppose all you want is to know whether *p*, such that once you're told that *p*, that's the end of it – but it isn't absent, in general. And just as testimonial belief doesn't interfere with the acquisition of non-testimonial belief, it doesn't interfere with the acquisition of explanatory understanding. Believing that *p*, on the basis of testimony, doesn't stop you inquiring about why *p*. Testimonial belief that eating meat is morally wrong – Hills' example – doesn't preclude or interfere with a person's ability to acquire understanding of why eating meat is morally wrong; you could believe that eating meat is morally wrong and still wonder why eating meat is morally wrong, and engage

¹⁹ Grimm's (2006, pp. 533-4, forthcoming) view is more subtle: on his view, the psychological state of which understanding is a species is a distinctive species of belief, not a non-doxastic state. Nothing I'll say here rides on this infelicity.

²⁰ It is sometimes said (Coady 1994, p. 68-9, Hills 2009, p. 121) that testimony is not a source of practical knowledge or "know how" (in one sense). For reasons analogous to those articulated here, that belief is insufficient for practical knowledge is orthogonal to the question of whether testimonial practical knowledge is possible.

in inquiry about that question. If you want to understand why p, you will seek such understanding, notwithstanding any testimonial belief that p that she may have.

4 Testimony and elections

I claim that the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief is a social virtue, which means (§1) that preferring non-testimonial belief tends to (pro tanto) benefit the possessor's society. And I assumed (§2.3) that preferring non-testimonial belief is valuable because non-testimonial belief is relatively valuable. In this section, I shall argue that non-testimonial belief tends to (pro tanto) benefit the possessor's society. We again (cf. §3) seek a disparity between testimonial and non-testimonial belief. I'll argue that the relative value of non-testimonial belief comes from its consequences when the believer is an ongoing participant in elections, or an **elector**, for short.

4.1 Non-testimonial belief and electoral reliability

Imagine that a nefarious villain holds a group of people hostage and subjects them to the following dilemma: he will present a difficult (true-or-false) problem in arithmetic, and then, after an interval, he will demand an answer from the group. If they answer correctly, they will be released; if they answer incorrectly, they will be held indefinitely. The hostages *as a group* must offer an answer, and so must make a **collective decision**. Suppose that the hostages are all decent, and all equally good, at solving difficult problems in arithmetic. What should they do? Here are two possible policies they might adopt:

- **WORK INDEPENDENTLY.** Each hostage works on the problem alone, and they then compare their answers. If their answers agree, they present that answer to the villain. If not, they repeat the procedure until unanimity is reached.
- **FOLLOW THE LEADER.** The hostages draw straws to determine a leader, who works on the problem alone, and then presents her answer to the villain.

WORK INDEPENDENTLY is clearly superior to **FOLLOW THE LEADER**, and the equally clear reason for this is that the hostages are more likely to present a correct answer, under the former policy, than under the latter policy. The method described by the former policy is more reliable, vis-à-vis presenting a correct answer to the villain, than the method described by the latter.

Suppose the hostages decide to adopt **WORK INDEPENDENTLY** as their policy, and consider Elinor, one of the hostages. Everyone has sat down to work on the problem, and pencils have been put to paper. But Elinor finds math dull, and she happens to have a set of entertaining TED lectures available on her iPad. She realizes that it would be more fun to watch the lectures than to work on the math problem. And she also realizes that she can clearly see her neighbor's answer. So she decides not to work on the math problem, watches a few TED lectures, and copies her answer from her neighbor's paper.

Elinor has done something bad. Part of it is that she has violated the policy that the hostages agreed to adopt – she has shirked her responsibilities under that policy. But she has betrayed their trust in an another way as well. Her shirking has diminished the reliability of the method employed by the hostages, which in turn has put them at greater risk of being held captive. The success of **WORK INDEPENDENTLY** requires – no surprise here! – that each hostage *work independently*. Copying another hostage's work undermines the effectiveness of the policy, and makes an incorrect collective answer more likely.

The upshot of this, when it comes to the relative value of non-testimonial belief, is emerging. But let's first note that it wouldn't matter if **WORK INDEPENDENTLY** were amended to prescribe

a simple referendum, with the answer that receives the majority (or plurality, see below) of votes being presented to the villain. As well:

- (i) It wouldn't matter if there were some disparities in mathematical ability among the hostages, so long as everyone was decent at solving the relevant kind of problem.
- (ii) It wouldn't matter if some (degree of) copying were built into the policy – for example, if a randomly chosen hostage were to make some initial calculations, with everyone then working alone based on the premise that those initial calculations were correct.
- (iii) It wouldn't matter if the problem were multiple-choice.

In any of these cases, WORK INDEPENDENTLY (*mutatis mutandis*) would still be better than FOLLOW THE LEADER, and, the former policy having been adopted, copying another person's work would still be bad vis-à-vis the reliability of the hostages' method.

The idea behind my argument so far is captured formally by Condorcet's jury theorem (cf. List and Pettit 2004), on which the reliability of electoral outcomes (or **electoral reliability**) approaches infallibility as the number of electors increases, so long as said electors are competent (roughly, if each is at least 50% likely to get the right answer on her own) and independent (roughly, if each is not influenced by the votes of the other electors). In the canonical formulation of the theorem, it is assumed that electors (i) are not only competent but equally competent, (ii) that their votes are independent, and (iii) that the vote is binary (guilty or not-guilty). But Condorcet's conclusion, *mutatis mutandis*, follows even if these assumptions are modified. What we do require are the assumption that each elector is **competent**, in the sense that the probability that she votes correctly is greater than .5, and the assumption that the electors' degrees of dependence on each other are small, where, given two electors S_1 and S_2 , S_1 's **degree of electoral dependence on S_2** is the difference between the (conditional) probability that S_1 votes a certain way, given that S_2 votes that way, and the (unconditional) probability that S_1 votes that way.

We can conclude that, when electors are competent, electoral reliability is proportional to (among other things) the electors' degrees of electoral dependence on each other. Electoral reliability is thus diminished when an elector's degree of electoral dependence on another is high rather than low. As Christian List and Philip Pettit (2004) put it:

[T]he theorem will apply only if every group member does his or her bit. All members must form a judgment independently of the judgments of others[.] They may have deliberated together and listened to the evidence and argument produced by others but, in the end, they must go their own epistemic way. (pp.)

And thus electors whose votes are based on the votes of other electors are “epistemic free-riders.” (p.)

What has all this to do with non-testimonial belief? Three ideas will allow us to explain the relative value of non-testimonial belief. First, just as electors can be dependent on each other when it comes to their votes, they can be dependent on each other when it comes to their beliefs. S_1 's **degree of doxastic dependence on S_2** is the difference between the (conditional) probability that S_1 believes that p , given that S_2 believes that p , and the (unconditional) probability that S_1 believes that p . When someone enjoys a low degree of doxastic dependence on others, I shall say that she enjoys **doxastic independence**. Moreover, *outré* cases aside, the voting behavior of electors influenced in part by their beliefs. I don't just mean beliefs with content of the form <that I ought to vote for x >, for beliefs of this form are based on others.

My belief that I ought to vote in favor of carbon taxation is based on my beliefs about economics, about how carbon emissions cause climate change, about the value of life and biodiversity, about the ineptitude of bureaucrats as compared to the cleverness of entrepreneurs, and so on. Our electoral decisions are based, and influenced, by a range of factors whose breadth cannot be overstated. Our moral, religious, historical, biological, economic, and psychological beliefs come into play, to name only a few examples. Indeed, it seems to me, all our beliefs at least *might* influence our voting behavior. And there is, at least, no obvious way to draw a useful boundary between those beliefs that have electoral relevance and those that don't. Therefore, we can see that S_1 's degree of electoral dependence on S_2 is partly a function of S_1 's degree of doxastic dependence on S_2 . Higher (lower) degrees of doxastic dependence will tend to yield higher (lower) degrees of electoral dependence. This gives us reason to conclude that, when electors are competent, electoral reliability is inversely proportional to (among other things) the electors' degrees of doxastic dependence on each other.

Second, testimonial belief is conducive to higher degrees of doxastic dependence than non-testimonial belief. When S_1 believes that p on the basis of S_2 's testimony, the (conditional) probability that S_1 believes that p , given that S_2 believes that p , will generally be higher than the (unconditional) probability that S_1 believes that p . This is because the (conditional) probability that S_1 believes that p , given that S_2 believes that p , will generally be very high indeed: the institution of testimonial belief is designed to create sameness in belief; the whole point is that the hearer's belief will have the same content as the speaker's belief, allowing information to flow from speaker to hearer. However, when S_1 forms a non-testimonial belief that p , the (conditional) probability that S_1 believes that p , given that some other person believes that p , will generally be the same as (unconditional) probability that S_1 believes that p . Testimonial belief (on the part of S_1 , based on the testimony of S_2) is thus conducive to a higher degree of doxastic dependence (of S_1 on S_2) than non-testimonial belief (on the part of S_1).

Third, I shall assume that electoral reliability (in a society) is pro tanto valuable (for that society). It's beyond the scope of the present inquiry to defend this idea, and so it remains an assumption.

These three ideas give us the premises we need to construct an argument for the relative value of non-testimonial belief:

1. Testimonial belief (on the part of S_1 , based on the testimony of S_2) is conducive to a higher degree of doxastic dependence (of S_1 on S_2) than non-testimonial belief (on the part of S_1).
2. When electors are competent, electoral reliability is inversely proportional to (among other things) the electors' degrees of doxastic dependence on each other.
3. Electoral reliability (in a society) is pro tanto valuable (for that society).
4. Therefore, when electors are competent, non-testimonial belief (on the part of electors) is pro tanto better (for the believer's society) than testimonial belief (on the part of electors, based on the testimony of electors).

On my view, we citizens of liberal democracy are in a position analogous to that of the hostages described above. We have adopted a policy of making important collective decisions by election, and the reliability of this method requires that we work independently, in figuring out how we shall vote. Testimonial belief is the analogue of copying your neighbor's answer, in the case of the hostages, and this undermines the effectiveness of our liberal democratic policy. Thus non-testimonial belief is pro tanto better than testimonial belief.

I have argued that, when electors are competent, non-testimonial belief (on the part of electors) is pro tanto better (for the believer's society) than testimonial belief (on the part of electors,

based on the testimony of electors). Three comments on this conclusion. First, note that this claim does not apply to the beliefs of non-electors. Children, for example, do not vote, and so their non-testimonial beliefs do not enjoy this pro tanto value. (This might vindicate an idea that is common in the literature on testimony, and especially the literature on moral testimony: that testimonial belief is more suitable for children than for adults.) And the citizens of non-democratic regimes, for example, do not vote; my argument says nothing about the relative value of their non-testimonial beliefs. Second, the claim does not apply to electors' beliefs based on the testimony of non-electors. As David Estlund (1994) argues, the jury theorem requires that electors' votes are independent of one another, but there is no requirement that they not defer to someone outside their ranks, who does not vote (p. 137-8), for example, an "opinion leader" who influences their political views, so long as electors do not defer "blindly" – the (conditional) probability that an elector votes correctly, given that she defers to an opinion leader's advice, must be higher than the (unconditional) probability that said advice is correct (pp. 152-8). Third, the claim does not apply to non-competent electors.

My thesis is that preferring non-testimonial belief is a social virtue (§§1 – 2). Given these three comments, must my characterization of the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief (§2.1) be amended? First, when it comes to children, I say that preferring non-testimonial belief is a virtue for adults, and when it comes to citizens of non-democratic regimes, I say that preferring non-testimonial belief is a virtue for citizens of liberal democracy. Some virtues only have application for certain people in certain circumstances – the solitary do not need modesty, the invulnerable do not need courage – and so perhaps preferring non-testimonial belief is just an instance of this phenomenon. Second, when it comes to deference to non-electors, I'll amend to the claim that preferring non-testimonial belief is *generally* (pro tanto) valuable, which claim admits of exceptions. Third, when it comes to competence, no amendment seems required. The non-competent elector still ought to *prefer* non-testimonial belief, but given her lack of competence, she ought to settle for belief based on the testimony of someone competent – or, perhaps more responsibly, abstain from voting altogether.

I have argued that non-testimonial belief is pro tanto better than testimonial belief. This value might be overridden, since, as List and Pettit (2004) put it, "making a private independent judgment ... is costly; it requires time and effort." (p.) I've said nothing here about the relative "strength" of the pro tanto value of non-testimonial belief. But it seems clear that that are some goods, including middlebrow light entertainment, such that the person who shirks her responsibilities vis-à-vis independent inquiry, for the sake of said goods, strikes us as a rather low and shallow person. In this connection, cynics easily forget that our elections are matters of life and death – although (unlike the case of the hostages) the lives in question are often those of other people, and not our own.

I'll conclude this section by considering some objections to my argument. First, you might object that public political debate is also conducive to doxastic dependence, since it is conducive to testimonial belief, and that I am thus committed to the view that public political debate is pro tanto bad – an unappealing commitment. But public political debate is not necessarily conducive to testimonial belief. As John Rawls (1999) notes (in defense of the irrelevance of Condorcet's jury theorem), the views of electors "will be influenced by the course of the discussion." (p. 315)²¹ However, being influenced by a discussion is not the same as believing on the basis of testimony. Someone might articulate an argument that convinces me to accept some conclusion, but my belief in this conclusion is not based on her testimony – it is based on the argument that she articulated. Although my belief is socially dependent (§2.2), our beliefs may, for all we have said, be probabilistically independent.

²¹ See also Feld, "Rousseau's General Will," p. 570.

Second, you might object that in liberal democratic elections, as opposed to in jury deliberations, we do not attempt to decide whether some factual proposition is true, but rather express our non-cognitive preferences, with the aim of coordinating our conduct in a fair and non-violent way. Therefore, so the argument goes, my talk of correctness and reliability (above) are out of place in connection with liberal democratic elections. However, the relevant preferences are based on, and influenced by, our beliefs. The liberal who favors a carbon tax bases her love of carbon taxation on her beliefs about economics and the environment; the populist who loathes socialized medicine bases her loathing on her belief that the President wants to execute her grandmother. À la Hume, we can understand preferences as correct or incorrect, in a derivative sense, based on the truth or falsity of the beliefs on which they are based. Talk of correctness and reliability can thus be rehabilitated.

Third, you might object that my argument ignores or underestimates the importance of experts in liberal democracy, by suggesting (for example) that you ought to ignore the testimony of experts, in favor of independent inquiry. So, for example, Fricker (2006b) writes that a “refusal to bow to others’ judgment or advice even when they are clearly relatively expert ... is pig-headed irrationality, not epistemic virtue or strength.” (p. 239) Three replies to this worry. First, preference comes in degrees, and we have been considering an other-things-being-equal preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief) (§2.1). Such a preference would never require ignoring expert testimony. Rather, it might require attempting to verify expert testimony with independent inquiry, when convenient. Second, some beliefs that appear to be based on expert testimony really aren’t. I have in mind, in particular, beliefs based on scientific consensus. One of the reasons I believe that climate change is partially caused by human activity is that there is a scientific consensus to this effect. But I don’t think that I believe this proposition on the basis of testimony. Rather, I appeal to something like this: there would not easily be a scientific consensus that *p* unless it were the case that *p*. And this principle, in turn, I base on my understanding of how science works – I think that people, using such-and-such methods, would not easily come to a consensus that *p* unless it were the case that *p*. It is true that I must trust the scientists to have used such-and-such methods, and about what their consensus is. But I don’t believe that climate change is partially caused by human activity because scientists say that climate change is partially caused by human activity. I believe this because scientists say that they, using such-and-such methods, have come to a consensus that climate change is partially caused by human activity.²² So my argument doesn’t imply that you ought to enjoy scientific consensus. Third, we should bear in mind that while experts are sources of information, they are also sources of arguments and explanations, which makes possible different ways of engaging with them. Consider someone who wonders about evolution, who asks her friend, a biologist, whether whales evolved from land mammals, and who believes this proposition upon receiving an affirmative answer. Compare someone who likewise wonders about evolution, and who asks her friend, a biologist, to review some of the anatomical evidence that supports the conclusion that whales evolved from land mammals. Or compare someone who asks for an explanation of the process of selection by which whales evolved from land mammals. All three of these people end up with socially dependent beliefs (§2.2) that whales evolved from land mammals. But the belief of the person who asks for evidence (that *p*) and the belief of the person who asks for explanation (of why *p*) will be less testimonial (§2.1) than the belief of the person who merely asks whether *p*. So I don’t think my argument suggests the social value of ignoring experts, for engaging with experts, in the right way, can be conducive to (degrees of) non-testimonial belief.

4.2 Non-testimonial belief and electoral legitimacy

²² In this connection, recall the argument “50,000,000 Elvis fans can’t be wrong.”

Non-testimonial belief is better than testimonial belief, when it comes electoral reliability (§4.1). My argument for this appealed to the causal consequences of electors' high degrees of doxastic dependence on each other. In this section I'll articulate a non-consequentialist critique of doxastic dependence among electors, which appeals to the value of electoral legitimacy.

Legitimacy is here understood as property of elections. Although the policy of making collective decisions by election is essential to what we call liberal democracy, many elections intuitively fall short of a liberal democratic ideal, and making collective decisions by election is intuitively insufficient for liberal democracy. Certain facts about an election can undermine its status as genuinely liberal and democratic:

- An election is flawed if electors are not free to vote their conscience – for example, if they are threatened with violence unless they vote a certain way.
- An election is flawed if suffrage is less than universal – for example, if a religious minority is denied the right to vote.
- An election is flawed if electors are denied the opportunity to vote their conscience – for example, if the ballots are written in a language which the electors cannot understand.

Flaws of this kind come not only from facts about the mechanics of the election itself, but from facts about the processes and institutions of debate and deliberation that exist prior to an election. So:

- An election is flawed if citizens are not free to form political associations, or if they are not free to stand for office – for example, if certain political parties are banned.
- An election is flawed if citizens are not free to express their political views – for example, if there are laws against *lèse-majesté*.
- An election is flawed if the press is not free to report on, and express opinions about, politics – for example, if opposition TV stations are shut down by the government or agents acting on their behalf.

In these cases, we are inclined to say that the election was not “free and fair.” In any event, there is a failure of **electoral legitimacy**, and the election thus falls short of a liberal democratic ideal.

The case of censorship is illustrative of an important point: electoral legitimacy is distinct from electoral reliability (§4.1). This is a corollary of a point made by Mill in his discussion of free speech (*On Liberty*, Chapter II): the obligation not to censor applies to true and false speech alike. Censorship isn't bad because it keeps the truth from being told, for if that were the reason, then censorship of false speech wouldn't be bad. But censorship is bad, even when the speech censored is false. Mill's more persuasive defenses of free speech are the following two arguments.²³ First, unless a (true) opinion is “vigorously and earnestly contested . . . it will be held in the manner of a prejudice,” and so assertions of its (false) negation ought not be censored. Second, without being opposed to criticism, “the meaning of [a true] doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost or enfeebled,” and so assertions of its negation ought not be censored. But there is another reason to reject censorship. Suppose I win re-election, having sent my goons around to beat up the staff of the main opposition newspaper, and to destroy their printing press, in order to prevent them from reporting that I took a bribe from a

²³ The less persuasive are these: that any opinion “may, for aught we can certainly know, be true,” and that any opinion “may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of the truth.” These claims seem false when applied to some cases of intuitively protected speech, e.g. the assertion that Barack Obama is the leader of Al Qaida.

conglomerate of pistachio farmers. I took no such bribe, so their story would have been false. Despite suppressing a false report, and thus preserving (to this extent) the truth of the electorate's beliefs, my censorship undermines the legitimacy of my election. It may be that my censorship has also allowed prejudice and enfeebled commitment to spread among my constituents. But it seems bad for another reason: that the election was not legitimate.

There is much more to be said about electoral legitimacy, both on the question of its nature and on the question of its value. These questions lie beyond the scope of the present inquiry, and I am going to assume here that electoral legitimacy (in a society) is *pro tanto* valuable (for that society).

What has all this to do with non-testimonial belief? I argued above (§4.1) that testimonial belief (on the part of S_1 , based on the testimony of S_2) is conducive to a higher degree of doxastic dependence (of S_1 on S_2) than non-testimonial belief (on the part of S_1). I shall now argue that electoral legitimacy is inversely proportional to (among other things) the electors' degrees of doxastic dependence on other people. Why think this? Consider the citizens of the city-state of **Testimonia**, who enjoy the testimonial largesse of an omniscient, sincere, and garrolous benefactor. As a result, the citizens of Testimonia (apart from the benefactor) base *all* of their beliefs on the testimony of the benefactor: on any question that occurs to them, they consult the benefactor, who always knows the answer.²⁴ As a result of this, they all (including the benefactor) believe the same things. Imagine, finally, that collective decisions are made by election in this society.²⁵ However, so my argument goes, these elections would suffer from a lack of legitimacy – they would fall short of the liberal democratic ideal that I articulated above. Elections in Testimonia would be a sham, because the benefactor, and not the electors *as a group*, would decide the outcome of every election. Moreover, this legitimacy deficit is explained by the electors' doxastic dependence on the benefactor, for we can easily imagine that the other necessary conditions on legitimacy have been met: freedom from coercion, universal suffrage, a free press, and so on. In addition to these, doxastic independence (§4.1) is required for electoral legitimacy.

I think there are at least two reasons why this is so. First, liberal democrats want the outcome of elections to be grounded in **public reason**. (This pertains to their status as democrats.) We want more than just an outcome that a plurality of electors happened to choose. We want an outcome backed by publicly articulated argument. In Testimonia, electoral outcomes are backed by no such argument. At best, they are backed by arguments privately articulated in the mind of the benefactor. Doxastic independence is the solution to this problem. What's lacking in Testimonia is (to borrow Mill's language, if not his idea) a vigorous and earnest contest between opinions, which would generate the publicly articulated arguments we're looking for. Doxastic independence is a necessary precondition of such a contest, for without such independence there can be no difference of opinion, and thus doxastic independence is conducive to the articulation of public reasons. Now you might object that Testimonia's benefactor could publicly articulate arguments in defense of her beliefs. But this wouldn't satisfy our desire for legitimacy: what we want are electoral outcomes backed by arguments *collectively* articulated by the electors. This isn't to say that leaders (elected officials, activists, clerics) shouldn't **articulate** arguments in defense of

²⁴ Is it possible for *all* of their beliefs to be non-testimonial? Perhaps they require some non-testimonial belief *about* what the benefactor says. In any event, we shall imagine the smallest possible amount of non-testimonial belief.

²⁵ N.b. that it doesn't matter, for my argument below, whether the benefactor is an elector or not.

their beliefs. It's to say that the demand for grounding in public reason is only satisfied when such reasons are appreciated and understood, and finally articulated, by the electorate.

Second, liberal democrats are committed to a kind of **pluralism**. (This pertains to their status as liberals.) As Rawls (1996) famously argues:

[P]olitical liberalism assumes the fact that reasonable pluralism is a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines[.] This pluralism is not seen as disaster but rather as the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions. (p. xxvi)

From this perspective, the existence of difference of opinion is a sign that everything is going right in a society, and the unanimity of the citizens of Testimonia is a sign that something has gone horribly wrong in their society. And it is clear that doxastic independence, absent interference from an illiberal state, will be conducive to the production of a plurality of opinions on almost any question. Now you might object that Testimonia's benefactor might offer something like a plurality of opinions, by dividing her mind into compartments, and assigning each one a comprehensive doctrine to defend. (This is something like what happens in the bureaucracies of liberal states.) But I think this is just to recognize the value of doxastic independence – in this case, between the belief-like states of the benefactor's various mental compartments.

These two explanations offer just a sketch of how we might begin to explain the appeal of doxastic independence, for liberal democrats. A deeper explanation is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Putting together what I have said so far, along with premise (1) from the argument from electoral reliability (§4.1), here is my argument:

1. Testimonial belief (on the part of S_1 , based on the testimony of S_2) is conducive to a higher degree of doxastic dependence (of S_1 on S_2) than non-testimonial belief (on the part of S_1).
2. Electoral legitimacy is inversely proportional to (among other things) the electors' degrees of doxastic dependence on other people.
3. Electoral legitimacy (in a society) is pro tanto valuable (for that society).
4. Therefore, non-testimonial belief (on the part of electors) is pro tanto better (for the believer's society) than testimonial belief (on the part of electors).

As with my previous conclusion (§4.1), this conclusion does not apply to non-electors. However, unlike my previous conclusion, this conclusion applies both to non-competent electors and to testimony from non-electors. In any event, if I am right, we have found another way in which non-testimonial belief is pro tanto better than testimonial belief.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that non-testimonial belief is pro tanto better than testimonial belief (§4). I conclude that preferring non-testimonial belief is a virtue (cf. §2.3), in the sense articulated above (§1). Indeed, preferring non-testimonial belief is a *social* virtue – i.e. a character trait that benefits the possessor's society – since non-testimonially belief is *socially* better than testimonial belief – i.e. it is better for the believer's society. Recall the idea that preferring non-testimonial belief is a manifestation of vicious selfishness, individualism, egotism, or egoism. We can see now that this is not the case. Indeed, we have seen that a number of selfish accounts – i.e. those that appeal to non-testimonial belief's benefits for the believer – fail (§3).

My discussion has left open the **disvalue** of a preference for non-testimonial belief. I have sought justification for this preference, by asking after its (pro tanto) value. Two ideas call for further research. First, you might worry that the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief (§2.1) might interfere with your ability to contribute to collective endeavors that require a “**division of epistemic labor.**” Scientific inquiry (for example) – but also non-intellectual projects like sports – require belief based on the testimony of your collaborators. As I argued above (§4.1), an other-things-being-equal preference for non-testimonial belief (to testimonial belief) would never require refusing to accept anyone’s testimony. But it’s worth contrasting the pro tanto value of non-testimonial belief, which I’ve defended here, with the pro tanto value of collective endeavors that seem to require significant degrees of doxastic dependence (§4.1) on collaborators. However, we should bear in mind that “division of epistemic labor” can take several forms. Suppose that you and I want to know whether two species of vole – the Korean and the Malaysian – have social cognition. Consider two divisions of our labor:

- We agree that you will travel to Korea, conduct research on the Korean vole, and come to a conclusion about whether said voles have social cognition; and that I will travel to Malaysia, conduct research on the Malaysian vole, and come to a conclusion about whether said voles have social cognition; and that when we meet again you will tell me whether Korean voles have and I will tell you whether Malaysian voles have social cognition. We’ll then both know the answer to our original question.
- We agree that you will travel to Korea, conduct research on the Korean vole, and keep accurate records of your experiments; and that I will travel to Malaysia, conduct research on the Malaysian vole, and keep accurate records of your experiments; and that when we meet again we will go over the records together, sharing all our data, and together come to a conclusion about whether Korean voles have social cognition and about whether Malaysian voles have social cognition. We’ll then both know the answer to our original question.

In both cases I form testimonial beliefs: in the first case, about social cognition in Korean voles; in the second case, about the results of your experiments on Korean voles. And in both cases I come to know whether Korean voles have social cognition. But in the second case, this knowledge seems *less* testimonial than in the first case (§2.1).

Second, you might worry that the character trait of preferring non-testimonial belief (§2.1) might lead you to harm other people, namely, those who offer themselves as sources of testimony. As J.L. Austin (1946) observes, “[i]f I have said I know or I promise, you insult me in a special way by refusing to accept it.” (p. 171) We should keep in mind (cf. §4.1) that an other-things-being-equal preference for non-testimonial belief wouldn’t ever require refusing to accept another person’s testimony. However, such a preference might require attempting to verify said testimony with further inquiry, and that might sometimes insult the testifier. In any event, as Miranda Fricker (2007, Chapter 1) argues, when such insults are leveled systematically against a marginalized group, with the function of sustaining their marginalization, injustice supervenes.²⁶ You might thus worry that preferring non-testimonial belief might lead you to perpetrate what Fricker calls “**testimonial injustice.**” More abstractly, testimonial belief seems to involve a kind of **trust** in the testifier, and such trust might have (pro tanto) social value – as a precondition for, or constituent of, interpersonal relationships (cf. Baker 1987). So the pro tanto social value of the kind of trust involved in testimonial belief – both in general, and as an antidote for

²⁶ Perhaps with some exceptions, e.g. if said marginalization is motivated by the knowledge that said group’s members are unreliable testifiers, e.g. members of the mafia.

testimonial injustice – must be studied, and then balanced against the pro tanto value of preferring non-testimonial belief.²⁷

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²⁷ Research on this paper was supported by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (who paid for leave) and by the University of New Mexico (who provided an office). For valuable feedback, I owe thanks to audiences at the University of Texas at Austin, at Southern Methodist University, at the University of New Mexico, at the Australian National University, at the University of Sydney, at the 2013 Bled Philosophy Conference on *Evidence, Reliability, and Group Epistemology*, at the University of Rochester, and at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where I presented this paper, and to Anne Baril and Sandy Goldberg.

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