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Learning from Words. Testimony as a Source of Knowledge. BY JENNIFER LACKEY.
(Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 295. Price £35.00.)

In *Learning From Words* Jennifer Lackey professes to revolutionize the epistemology of testimony in at least two crucial ways. First, Lackey claims to show that the widely held thesis that testimony can only transmit knowledge/warrant is false as, in fact, knowledge/warrant can be generated by testimony. Second, she denies that reductionism and non-reductionism exhaust the theoretical options for the epistemology of testimony—another assumption that is taken for granted by many contributors to the field—and argues that a third option, which she labels ‘dualism’, is in fact preferable to both of these positions.

Central to virtually all of Lackey’s arguments are a variety of highly imaginative cases that will almost certainly continue to attract the attention of epistemologists of testimony for years to come. Whether or not Lackey’s cases are always successful in establishing the conclusions envisaged, they forcefully make a case that the received characterisation of the positions in the reductionism/non-reductionism divide is in desperate need of repair and Lackey makes some very plausible suggestions for improvements on this count. Her argument that the two positions do not exhaust our theoretical options because one might hold that positive reasons on the part of the hearer are, contrary to non-reductionism, necessary but, contrary to reductionism, not sufficient for testimonial warrant is also spot on.

As regards her first major thesis—that testimony does not merely transmit knowledge/warrant—however, Lackey’s case is less than fully convincing. In order to understand Lackey’s argument it will first be illuminating to note that she advocates a shift in focus in the epistemology of testimony from speakers’ *beliefs* to speakers’

statements. In and of itself this shift has no direct bearing on the issue of transmission and will thus not be the target of my arguments. What is important for present purposes is Lackey's additional claim that what matters for testimonial knowledge is not whether or not the speaker knows/warrantedly believes the content of her testimony but rather whether or not the speaker's statement is reliable (and/or safe/sensitive). In support of this claim, Lackey adduces three cases in all of which the speaker, S, does not know/warrantedly believe the content, P, of her statement—because she does not believe P or else because her warrant for P is defeated—yet her statement of P is reliable (safe/sensitive). Since in Lackey's cases, intuitively, the hearer comes to know P when she forms a corresponding belief on the basis S's testimony, the cases provide reason to believe that what matters for testimonial knowledge are not speakers' knowledge/warranted beliefs but reliable (safe/sensitive) statements.

To see what's wrong with Lackey's argument notice, first, that reliability (safety/sensitivity) of a statement will not always put a hearer in a position in which she can attain testimonial knowledge/warrant. Thus consider the following case:

Jade is a very sincere person. She also is very knowledgeable about wild birds. Due to romantic feelings, however, she is disposed to form overly hasty beliefs concerning the presence of lovebirds during walks with her boyfriend in her favourite park: she will believe that a lovebird is present even when at best she has warrant that some bird or other is present. Suppose during such a walk, from the corner of her eye, Jade catches a glimpse of a bird flying by and forms an overly hasty belief that a lovebird flew by. Unbeknownst to Jade,

lovebirds are the only type of bird that live in the park (the wider area/the isolated island on which the episode takes place).

In this case, Jade does not know that a lovebird flew by. Moreover, when she tells her boyfriend that a lovebird just flew by, her boyfriend, despite knowing Jade to be sincere and knowledgeable about birds, does not acquire the corresponding knowledge via Jade's testimony. Yet, since lovebirds are the only type of bird in the area, whilst Jade's disposition is specifically tied to lovebirds and she is as sincere as she is, Jade's testimony is reliable—nearly every time she reports that she has seen a lovebird, she will have seen one—as well as safe—she would not report it without it being the case—and sensitive—if no lovebird had flown by (i.e. if nothing had happened), she wouldn't have reported to have seen one. It seems that the problem here is that although Jade's statement is reliable (safe/sensitive), it wants an appropriate connection with the facts—or, in other words, it wants *warrant*. There is thus reason to believe that a statement will put a hearer in a position to acquire testimonial knowledge only if it is also warranted. Suppose that we add to this an assumption I do not have the space to defend in this review, *viz.* that a speaker S's statement will be warranted in the sense envisaged only if it satisfies the norm of assertion. (N.B.: Lackey is suspicious of the idea that the statement's satisfying the norm of assertion is necessary for the hearer's acquisition of testimonial knowledge (p. 106, n.8). However, the reason why she is suspicious about this is that she takes herself to have shown that what matters for testimonial knowledge is the *reliability* of the speaker's testimony. As we have seen now, Lackey is mistaken about this. As things stand, then, her suspicion is not justified.) If this is correct, then, since, by Lackey's own lights, the speakers' statements in two out of three of her initial cases

fail to satisfy the norm of assertion (cf. p. 106, n. 8), their statements will not be warranted and hence will not put their audience in a position to acquire testimonial knowledge. Lackey's case against the transmission thesis would then entirely rest on the remaining case. This case has the following structure: A subject, S, has evidence that she recognises to make a very good case for a proposition P. At the same time, even though she recognises them to be evidentially irrelevant to the matter, certain other features of her psychology—such as strong faith in a proposition inconsistent with P, certain feelings or emotions that make her suspicious of/doubt P etc.—prevent her from believing P. Since knowledge entails belief, S does not know P either. However, when, in recognition of the fact that her evidence makes so strong a case for P, she testifies to P and her hearer comes to believe P on the basis of such testimony, intuitively, her hearer's belief qualifies as knowledge. Hence knowledge here is *generated* by testimony rather than *transmitted*.

Now, even if we grant Lackey this case so that *knowledge* is in fact not transmitted via testimony, arguably *warrant* is transmitted. After all, it is plausible that in the type of case at issue, S has a warrant for P even though she does not, as it were, doxastically exploit this warrant. The fact that she has this warrant and bases her statement on it warrants her statement which, in turn, warrants the hearer's belief. There is thus an important sense in which warrant is transmitted to the hearer by testimony even in Lackey's cases.

One might even wonder whether in the type of case at issue, contrary to Lackey's contention, S does believe P after all. Lackey considers this objection in a footnote (p. 113, n. 16) but dismisses it quickly on the grounds that it is "surely possible" that some such S fails to believe the relevant P. However, on reflection, her dismissal seems a bit too quick. If, for instance, an evidentialist account of belief à la

Jonathan Adler (2003, *Belief's Own Ethics*, Oxford: OUP) is true, then one *must* believe P provided “in full awareness one regards one’s evidence or reasons as adequate to the truth of *p*” (p. 32). Since the subjects in Lackey’s cases are fully aware that the evidence for the propositions they assert make a convincing case for their truth, by Adler’s account of belief, they *must* also believe them to be true. That is to say, however, that, if Adler is right, it *impossible* for subjects in Lackey’s cases to fail to believe P. Since if, in Lackey’s cases, all that prevents the subjects from knowing is their alleged lack of belief, we would now have reason to believe that they have knowledge after all. In that case, Lackey’s cases would even fail to establish the weaker thesis that the transmission thesis for *knowledge* is false.

In closing, even though Lackey’s arguments do not always convince me, the book is certainly a must-read for epistemologists of testimony. Not only does she characterise the major battlefields of the debate with outstanding clarity, her substantive and often novel and insightful contributions provide an unmissable source of ideas for anyone working in the field.

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