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Contents

HEINER FLOHR	The Importance of Biology for the Social Sciences	1
WOLFGANG R. KOHLER	Is Man Morally Obligated Not to Destroy Nature?	20
DIETER BIRNBACHER	Prolegomena to an Ethic of Quantities	36
KAI NIELSEN	Marx, Marxism and Egalitarianism	56
ANGUS ROSS	Why Do We Believe What We Are Told?	70
<i>Discussion</i>		
ONORA O'NEILL	Practical Thinking and Socratic Questions	90
<i>Notices</i>		95
<i>Book Received</i>		95

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WHY DO WE BELIEVE WHAT WE ARE TOLD?

Angus Ross

I

As Hacking tells the story,¹ the idea of probability has its origins in the idea of the authority of testimony, the idea of the fitness to be believed of what is written or said. The task of the early scientist was to read the book of nature, and if assessments of probability came into the picture at all it was probability not in the modern sense of being supported by the evidence of experience but in the sense of being testified to by sound authority. Thus the extension of the notion of a sign to embrace what we would now call 'natural' signs at first involved no equivocation. Our present notions of evidence and probability involve, by contrast, the idea of a warrant for belief distinct from and independent of the authority of others, human or divine, and we are inclined to draw a sharp distinction between natural signs and conventional signs. However, the idea that corresponding to these two sorts of sign there exist two distinct kinds of warrant for belief has not recommended itself to philosophers. Having introduced the idea of evidence as a warrant for belief distinct from and independent of the authority of others, it is hard not to see it as the *sole* warrant. Thus Hume, in his famous discussion of miracles, insists that the authority of human testimony is itself founded on an 'experience of regular and constant conjunction'.² If we had not discovered by experience that people are generally to be relied upon as truthful and accurate reporters 'we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony' — and nor, by implication, would we have any reason to. In this respect at least, the words of others are for Hume a species of natural sign. They have a claim on our judgment only in so far as we have reason to regard them as evidence of the existence of the state of affairs they purport to report.

¹ Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (1975), chaps. 3–5.

² *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) Section X. There is, however, a hint of a different view of the character of our inclination to accept the judgment of others in Hume's account of the phenomenon of sympathy in Book II of the *Treatise*.

In part what is at issue here is the conditions for knowledge. If we hold, as Austin seems to have done,³ that being told something by a competent authority is a way of acquiring knowledge regardless of whether we are ourselves in a position to assess the competence of that authority, it may seem that knowledge has been made far too easily come by. (On the other hand, if we don't, it is not clear how we can see children as learning from their teachers.) But in upholding the Cartesian ideal of knowledge as a personal achievement, Hume is also the spokesman for an important strand in modern individualism. What is being resisted is the idea that the judgment of others, as expressed in what they say, has in itself some claim on an individual's judgment. Such a claim can arise only via the hearer's own assessment of the evidence for regarding the speaker as a reliable authority on the matter in question. For the hearer to adopt any other attitude to the opinions of others would involve a surrender of his autonomy, an abandonment of his own responsibility for the truth of his beliefs.

I want to suggest, nonetheless, that this account of our attitude to what is said involves a serious misunderstanding both of the nature of language and of the idea of knowledge. After discussing some of the difficulties facing the Humean account, I will sketch an alternative view of the matter which takes seriously the idea of the speaker's responsibility for what he says. I will conclude with some reflections on the ideas of knowledge and justification as they are employed in the context of communication.

II

One source of difficulty in Hume's account of the claims of testimony is his suggestion that we have discovered by experience that what people say is in general to be relied upon. If we found that what we took people to be saying usually turned out to be false, and not on a restricted range of questions but in general, would we not have to conclude that we had failed to understand them correctly?⁴ Before any question of believing what is said arises we must know what would count as its truth. For the question of truth to arise there must be standards of correct use which speakers generally attempt to meet, and which moreover they generally succeed in meeting. Standards that were found not

³ J. L. Austin, 'Other Minds' (1946) in *Collected Papers* (1961). See also Michael Welbourne, 'The Transmission of Knowledge', *Philosophical Quarterly* 1979.

⁴ There is of course a vast literature on this question, stemming largely from Davidson's 'Truth and Meaning', *Synthese* 1967.

to be observed, at least for the most part, could not be regarded as the appropriate standards by which to judge, and thus to interpret, the utterances in question.

It might be objected here that, even if it is a necessary truth that speakers generally tell the truth, it is a contingent matter that the words of a given language mean what they do. Thus our reliance on testimony must be founded, in the end, on an inductive inference of some sort from observations of usage to conjectures as to the meanings of words. But this is to assume a view of the language learner's relationship with other speakers that is at least open to question. Those learning a language for the first time, it might be said, are no more in a position to engage in the rational appraisal of hypotheses than they are in a position to engage in reasoned debate with their elders and betters. Here if anywhere we are dependent on accepting the authority of others.⁵ The empiricist model of complete cognitive independence is surely at its least plausible in the case of those learning their first language.

All the same, it is not clear how far the charge that our faith in the reliability of testimony in general cannot be based on an inference from experience damages Hume's view of our reliance on testimony in particular cases. It does not in itself seem to prevent us seeing our willingness to believe particular speakers on particular occasions as based on an assessment of the evidence for supposing them to be truthful and reliable. It does not prevent us seeing a speaker's words as themselves evidence, given this assumption of truthfulness and reliability, of the existence of the state of affairs they purport to report. Perhaps it shows that this cannot be the basis of our response in *all* cases, but without some hint as to what other grounds we might have for believing what we are told that does not take us much further forward. We must surely concede to Hume that we *can* view a speaker's words in this way. The question I want to press is whether this is how we *normally* view the words we hear. First though, let me sound a note of caution concerning the sense in which the term 'evidence' is being used here. To dispute Hume's view of the claims of testimony is not to deny that we can quite properly speak of what is said as evidence, as for example when witnesses give evidence in court. What is in question is whether, in normal communication, the hearer views the words he hears as *inductive* evidence, evidence in the characteristically modern, impersonal sense which

⁵ See Austin, *op cit*, p. 51.

has been purged of all suggestion of reliance on authority, human or otherwise.

III

The main problem with the idea that the hearer views the speaker's words as evidence arises from the fact that, unlike the examples of natural signs which spring most readily to mind, saying something is a deliberate act under the speaker's conscious control and the hearer is aware that this is the case. The problem is not that of whether the hearer can in these circumstances see the speaker's words as *good* evidence; it is a question of whether the notion of evidence is appropriate here at all. There is, of course, nothing odd about the idea of deliberately presenting an audience with evidence in order to get them to draw a desired conclusion, as when a photograph is produced in court. But in such a case what is presented is, or is presented as being, evidence independently of the fact of the presenter having chosen to present it. If a speaker's words are evidence of anything, they have that status only because he has chosen to use them. Speaking is not like allowing someone to see you are blushing. The problem is not, however, that the fact of our having chosen to use certain words *cannot* be evidence for some further conclusion. Our choices can certainly be revealing. The difficulty lies in supposing that the speaker himself sees his choice of words in this light, which in turn makes it difficult to suppose that this is how the hearer is intended to see his choice.

If the fact of a speaker having chosen to use certain words is to be seen as evidence of anything, it must be taken in conjunction with certain empirically established generalisations concerning the circumstances in which such a choice by such an individual is likely or unlikely — or better, a well grounded psychological theory giving us an insight into the factors which constrain or influence a speaker's choice of words. Seeing the speaker's utterance as evidence thus involves viewing it in a detached, objective light, as a natural phenomenon arising from certain causes. Now I can certainly understand the possibility of others viewing what I say in that light, and given a certain effort of detachment I can perhaps succeed in viewing my own past utterances in that light. What I cannot do is see the words I now choose to utter in that light, for I cannot at one and the same time see it as up to *me* what I shall say and see my choice, as an observer equipped with a theory of speech behaviour might see it, as determined or constrained by

facts about my own nature. Again, it is not that I cannot see my own choices as constrained. I can see them as constrained by my circumstances and by my limited abilities. I can also see my choice of words as constrained, in a different sense, by my obligation to be truthful, helpful or discrete, but that is not the sort of constraint that could furnish a basis for a hearer's inductive inferences without some further assumptions as to the extent to which I am inclined to respect the obligations in question. Any attempt to read my choice of words as evidence for the existence of the state of affairs they report will need to make some assumptions about my nature in the sense of my inclinations, preferences and commitments, but these are not things *I* can see as a constraint on my choice of words. To see my choices as constrained by such factors would be a form of disengagement from my own actions, what Sartre called 'bad faith'. Perhaps it is a possible stance, just about, but it is certainly not our normal attitude to our voluntary acts, and it is hardly compatible with taking responsibility for those acts.⁶

None of this shows that a speaker cannot see his utterances as something *others* may take as evidence, but it does mean that he cannot honestly offer them to others as such, that he cannot openly present them as evidence to hearers who are aware of their voluntary character. If, as hearers, we do see the words a speaker utters as evidence of something, as when the detective concludes from his suspect's evasive replies that he is trying to hide something, we are not accepting them in the spirit in which they are offered. That does happen, of course, but again it could not be the normal situation. Something important to true communication is missing when the hearer sees the speaker's words simply as evidence of the existence of a certain state of affairs.⁷

IV

But in that case what account *are* we to give of the hearer's reasons for believing what he is told? After all, the chief argument for

⁶ On the incompatibility between the agent's perspective on his own actions and that of a scientific observer, see Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (1960), chap. 3. On the importance of our being responsible for what we say, see sect. V below.

⁷ For a more general discussion of the incompatibility between the 'detached, objective' attitude of scientific understanding and manipulation and the 'participant reactive' attitudes characteristic of normal human relationships which involve treating people as responsible for their actions, see Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' in *Freedom and Resentment* (1974). For a different kind of objection to the evidence view, see Charles Taylor's 'Action as Expression' in *Intention and Intentionality* (1979) ed. Diamond and Teichman.

the evidence view is simply that there does not seem to be any other sort of reason that would count as a good reason.

Grice's famous discussion of the nature of the act of communication⁸ focusses chiefly on the intentions of speakers, but it might seem that what he has to say on that score furnishes an alternative account of what persuades the hearer. According to Grice, the speaker aims to get his hearer to believe something by getting him (the hearer) to recognise that this is what he is trying to do. Bennett has dubbed this the 'Gricean mechanism',⁹ but what Grice offers us is at best an incomplete account of how the speaker achieves his aim. We need to be told *why* the knowledge that the speaker wants him to believe something should make the hearer inclined to believe it. We could, of course, fall back at this point on the idea that the hearer reasons to himself that, given his experience of speakers in general or this speaker in particular, the speaker is unlikely to wish to make him believe something he (the speaker) does not believe, and further that he would be unlikely to believe it unless it were true. But that would once more make the speaker's utterance a certain sort of evidence of the truth of what is said, and indeed Bennett sees Grice as having introduced the notion of 'intention dependent evidence'¹⁰. Interestingly, though, this is not how Grice himself sees the matter. He remarks that the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intentions must be a reason for and not merely a cause of his response, and concedes that 'from one point of view questions about reasons for believing are questions about evidence', but he wants us to think of the hearer as having been furnished with a reason in something more like the sense in which one can have a reason for adopting a certain course of action: the hearer has been furnished with a *motive* for believing what he is told.¹¹ Unfortunately, however, Grice does not elaborate and it is not easy to see what he can have in mind. It can hardly be that the hearer adopts the belief in question simply to oblige the speaker, out of sheer goodwill. A state of mind that arose in that way simply would not constitute belief: that is not a reason for *believing* anything. Nor, of course, would

⁸ H. P. Grice, 'Meaning' *Philosophical Review* 1957, reprinted in P. F. Strawson (ed) *Philosophical Logic* (1967), and 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions', *Philosophical Review* 1969.

⁹ Jonathan Bennett, *Linguistic Behaviour*, chap. 1 & 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Grice, 'Meaning', p. 46-7. (References are to Strawson (ed) *Philosophical Logic*.)

that suggestion be consistent with seeing language as a means of transmitting knowledge.

Another possible move is to reject the question, to deny that the hearer is in any sense moved by *reasons* in believing what he is told. Thus Evans and McDowell criticise Grice for exaggerating the reflective, self-conscious character of communication.¹² The hearer, they point out, does not normally engage in any inferences. Rather we should see our understanding of what is said as a *perception* of meanings. Drawing a parallel with our use of money, they suggest that

if we take seriously the unreflectiveness which characterises ordinary monetary transactions, we shall be inclined to rest content with seeing ordinary acceptance of a coin as the outcome of the belief that it is *worth* so much. That would be the abandonment of any hope of a reductive account of the concept of non-intrinsic value. . .

It is not entirely clear what is supposed to follow concerning our ordinary acceptance of what is said, but we do not need to be engaged in a search for a reductive account of 'saying' to be unwilling to rest content with the thought that we believe that P because we believe, or perceive, a speaker to have said that P. We can fairly ask *why* this belief or perception leads to this response, and also whether or in what circumstance it *should* lead to this response. These questions do not have to be seen as an invitation to discuss unconscious processes of interference, nor, having rejected that approach, are we simply left with the job of saying how it comes about that we are inclined to respond in this way — an invitation to discuss processes of conditioning perhaps. We can, if we like, see the first of these questions as a request for an account of the particular character of this perception. It is not unreasonable to expect to be able to say something about how the perception of certain sounds as an act of saying something differs from other ways of perceiving those sounds, or indeed from the perception of pieces of paper as money, and any account which fails to make clear why this perception generally leads to our coming to believe something will be seriously incomplete.

Elsewhere McDowell appeals to an analogy with more primitive forms of communication like the alarm cries of various animals, where the crucial point is that

¹² Introduction to Evans and McDowell, *Truth and Meaning* (1976), p. xxii.

sensory confrontation with a piece of communicative behaviour has the same impact on the cognitive state of a perceiver as sensory confrontation with the state of affairs which the behaviour, as we say, represents; elements of the communicative repertoire serve as epistemic surrogates for the represented states of affair.¹³

But whatever the position with more primitive forms of communication this surely fails to capture what is distinctive about our perception of acts of linguistic communication. McDowell seems to want to reject the picture of the hearer as relying on an inductive inference from past cases,¹⁴ but that does not in itself distinguish our response to the words we hear from our unreflective response to natural signs. He also, it is true, refers to the 'alteration of nature involved in the onset of self-consciousness' in moving from primitive to linguistic communication, but he does not elaborate and leaves it unclear why, in so far as our inclination to believe what we hear survives conscious scrutiny, we should not be seen as taking the words we hear as evidence of the existence of the state of affairs they purport to report — even if we are not in a position to cite inductive grounds for so taking them. The switch from talk of inference to talk of perception does not in itself furnish us with a clear alternative to the evidence view of why we believe what we are told.¹⁵

V

One way of bringing out the difference between our attitude to natural signs and our attitude to language is to ask what view we

¹³ John McDowell, 'Meaning, Communication and Knowledge', in *Philosophical Subjects* (1980) ed. Z. van Straaten, p. 134.

¹⁴ 'It seems unpromising to suppose that knowledge by hearsay owes its status as knowledge, quite generally, to the knower's possessing a cogent argument to the truth of what he knows from the supposed reliability of the speaker.' *Op cit*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Neither does David Lewis's appeal to a 'convention of trust' among the users of a language (Lewis, 'Language and Languages' in *Language Mind and Knowledge*, ed. Gunderson (1975), pp. 7–12.) constitute a genuine alternative to the evidence view. Lewis is not, of course, suggesting that we believe what is said because we have agreed to do so, but nor can he be seriously suggesting, as his own account of 'convention' would seem to require, that we believe what is said because we see that it is in our interest to do so given that everyone else does so. Lewis's discussion of this question (pp. 8–9) actually runs his two proposed conventions together, but what is doing all the work is our knowledge that *speakers* observe a convention of *truth*, which seems to furnish us with evidential grounds of the familiar kind.

take of falsehood. Suppose we find a natural sign occurring in the absence of the phenomenon of which it is a sign, say (what looks like) smoke without fire. We may not be pleased to discover we have been misled, if we have been misled, but *criticism*, at least of the smoke or of what is producing it, will be out of place. If anything it will be self-criticism that is in order: a mental note to be more cautious in future. If someone speaks falsely, however, that *is* a matter for criticism, and for criticism of the speaker, regardless of whether there was any serious risk of our being misled. It is not simply that we object to someone having deliberately attempted to mislead us — natural signs, too, may be manipulated to that end. The point is that without an agreed distinction between correct and incorrect ways of using language it would not be a possible means of communication, misleading or otherwise. Thus it is not just that there is a moral objection to lying. Falsehood is a matter for criticism as an incorrect use of language whether it represents an attempt to deceive, an error of judgement, or simply a misunderstanding of the meanings of words.

One way of putting this is to say that the regularities on which the hearer relies are more than *de facto* regularities. Speech is a rule-governed activity and its rules impose certain normative requirements on speakers.¹⁶ Now clearly we can, and sometimes do, weigh up the evidence for supposing those with whom we have dealings are acting as they should, but to suppose that such calculations underlie our general inclination to assume that those with whom we have dealings are acting as they should would be to miss what distinguishes rules from mere regularities in behaviour.

It is a quite general feature of rule-governed life that the responsibility for ensuring that one's actions conform to the rules lies primarily with oneself and that others are in consequence entitled to assume, in the absence of definite reasons for supposing otherwise, that one's actions do so conform. Thus where the rules are such that one may perform a certain action only if a certain con-

¹⁶ David Lewis has argued (*Convention* (1969)) that our compliance with the requirement of truthfulness can be understood without reference to any specifically normative notions, for given that others are known to comply each will see it as in his own interest to comply. Whether that argument succeeds need not concern us here for Lewis does not dispute that truth is (also) a normative requirement, see 'Language and Languages', pp. 30–31. Where the present approach differs from Lewis is in seeing this fact as the key to understanding our response as hearers. One writer who has been at pains to stress the normative dimension of communication is Jurgen Habermas, see for example his 'What is Universal Pragmatics?' in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (1979), though I am not aware of his having discussed the present issue.

dition obtains, for example, that one may walk off with a suitcase only if it belongs to one or wear a plain gold ring on the third finger of the left hand only if one is married, then to perform the action is to entitle witnesses to assume that the corresponding condition obtains. If that assumption proves false and others act upon it with unfortunate consequences, at least part of the responsibility will lie with oneself for having entitled them to make that assumption.¹⁷ The use of signs to which truth-conditions are attached is clearly a case in point. Given the requirement that one speak truly, to utter 'P' is to entitle hearers with no reason for supposing otherwise to assume that P, not in the sense of having provided them with evidence which justifies that conclusion but in a sense more akin to moral entitlement. The hearer possesses a justification for believing what is said which stems directly from the speaker's responsibility for its truth.

Nor is that all. It is a feature of what we might call 'normal life' in a rule-governed community that each is not only entitled but under a certain obligation to assume, in the absence of definite reasons for believing otherwise, that his fellows are acting in accordance with the rules. To be counted a full, adult member of such a community on an equal footing with other members is not merely to be required to observe the rules; it is to be trusted to exercise this responsibility for oneself. There must, of course, be a general right of challenge, a right to challenge what we perceive as incorrect behaviour, but this right of challenge must have its limits. Respect for others as fellow judges of correct action on an equal footing with ourselves requires us to assume, in the absence of definite reasons for supposing otherwise, that others are acting with propriety. That is part of what it is to treat others as responsible for the propriety of their own actions. It follows that to knowingly and openly perform an action that is permissible only if a certain condition obtains is to place witnesses under a *prima facie* obligation to assume that the condition in question does indeed obtain. To wear a wedding ring is to place others who have nothing else

¹⁷ This may help to explain why we regard ourselves as under an obligation to observe an arbitrary rule. The objection to wearing a wedding ring when one is unmarried is simply that, given that it is generally *held* that one ought not to wear such a ring in those circumstances, others will be entitled to assume that one is married and one will risk being responsible for misleading them regardless of the view either party takes of the intrinsic wickedness of the act. Thus in the absence of any serious reasons (other than the wish to deceive) for wanting to wear such a ring when unmarried, the view that one ought not to do so will be self-sustaining.

to go on under a certain obligation to assume one is married. Thus to utter 'P' is not only to entitle one's hearers to assume that P; it is, other things being equal, to place them under a certain obligation to make that assumption. It is to make it 'difficult' for them to dissent, even inwardly, for to do so will be to challenge one's authority as a judge of the matter in question. To be told something is, other things being equal, to be placed under certain constraints as to what one *should* believe.

VI

To suggest that we believe what we are told, when we do, because we recognise that we are entitled and even under some obligation to do so is not to offer a rival account of some supposed process of inference. The awareness of entitlements and obligations we need to attribute to hearers is practical, not reflective, an awareness manifested directly in a propensity to act — or rather believe — accordingly. The suggestion is that our response to language reflects a *sensitivity* to the entitlements and obligations generated by its use.¹⁸

This suggestion avoids at least one of the difficulties facing the evidence view. It was argued in section III that a speaker cannot himself see his freely chosen words as evidence of the truth of what he is saying and thus cannot honestly offer them to others as such. There is no comparable difficulty in supposing he sees his words as entitling his hearer to believe something in the sense now under discussion. No abandonment of the agent's perspective, no abdication of responsibility for one's actions, is involved in seeing those actions as generating entitlements and obligations, either on the part of ourselves or on the part of others. (Compare the case of promising or issuing a command.) There is on the present account no difficulty in seeing the hearer as taking the speaker's words in the spirit in which they are honestly offered. The speaker, in taking responsibility for the truth of what he is saying, is offering

¹⁸ In a similar spirit, we might see Grice as claiming, surely correctly, that our response to what is said reflects a sensitivity to the speaker's intentions. Where the present account parts company with Grice is over what *else* is involved, and also over the characterisation of those intentions. As we have seen, Grice needs to say something more if he is to explain why the hearer believes what is said, but given his insistence on characterising communication independently of any reference to conventional, rule-governed means of communication the present account would seem to be unavailable to him.

his hearer not evidence but a *guarantee* that it is true, and in believing what he is told the hearer accepts this guarantee.

I do not, however, want to suggest that this is *always* our attitude to what is said, even when we believe it. Our attitude towards what is said by way of contributing to a philosophical discussion, for example, is quite different from our attitude to someone who offers us directions in the street. We do not, in the former case, simply take the speaker's word for it that what he is saying is true, and nor will he intend that we should. In what purports to be reasoned debate we expect to be provided with reasons that stand up on their own. Simple reliance on the speaker's word is out of place in that context.¹⁹ But then neither is the evidence view particularly plausible as an account of our response in that context. On any view, reasoned debate is a rather special case. The above is offered as an account of the more everyday sort of communication whose purpose is simply to impart information.

VII

But that, it may be objected, is precisely what communication as we are here describing it cannot claim to achieve. A defender of the evidence view of the claims of testimony could perhaps concede that in our response to what is said we are in fact moved by the kind of non-evidential, normative considerations we have described, even (perhaps) that it is in some sense right or natural that we should be so moved, part of what it is to be human. What he will be most reluctant to concede is that being justified in this sense in believing what we have been told constitutes a genuinely *rational* ground for believing it, or ever amounts to our having acquired *knowledge*.

There can, of course, be no general objection to introducing normative concepts like entitlement and obligation into a discussion of reasons for believing. In speaking of the possession of certain evidence as justifying us in drawing a certain conclusion, or as 'forcing' it upon us, we are already invoking entitlements and obligations to believe. That is the language of reason. But it does

¹⁹ See Welbourne, 'The Transmission of Knowledge', p. 5. Welbourne distinguishes cases in which we expect to be persuaded by argument or evidence from cases in which we believe what is said because we believe the *speaker*, where the latter is not simply a matter of believing what the speaker *says* or even believing what he says because he says it. Welbourne does not provide us with a positive account of what it is to 'believe a speaker', confining himself to a discussion of what it is not, but perhaps the above remarks can be seen as a contribution to such an account.

not follow that *all* entitlements and/or obligations to believe are of the sort that correspond to the idea of knowledge. Thus Chisholm suggests that

there are circumstances in which a man may be said to have a duty to rely upon certain propositions about his friends, or that his friends have assured him are true, even though he does not know these propositions to be true.²⁰

The obligation need not depend on one's relationship with the speaker. If Mrs Thatcher insists in parliament and on television that she did not know of the Peruvian peace plan until after the Belgrano was sunk, then (as a participant in a T.V. phone in programme had to be reminded) we are under some obligation to accept that this is so unless or until we have clear evidence to the contrary, yet we may hesitate to say that we *know* this to be so. Reason may permit, even require, us to entertain a doubt where respect for the speaker's word requires that doubt be set on one side.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to suppose that reason and respect for a speaker's word can in general be kept distinct, with reason conceived of as a concern solely with evidence or other impersonal (e.g. deductive) grounds. No sharp line can be drawn between respect for a speaker's word and respect for his judgment, respect for his authority as a judge of the matter on which he speaks, and it is the latter which is the source of the entitlements and obligations to which we have appealed. We have seen that a measure of respect for the authority of others as judges of the correct and incorrect use of language is a condition of the existence of shared standards of correct use. It must equally be seen as a condition of reason in so far as that implies a respect for objective standards of truth or fitness to be believed. We cannot divorce a respect for the general standards of truth embodied in our use of language from a respect for actual language users as authorities concerning the application of those standards in particular cases. Certainly, the man of reason attempts, as far as possible, to judge things for himself and exercises due caution in accepting the claims of others, but his very commitment to reason implies a respect for the judgment of others in general if not always for the judgment of particular others.

Being constitutive of reason, this general respect for the judg-

²⁰ R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (1966), p. 14.

ment of others cannot be seen as founded on some prior exercise of reason. In particular, it cannot be seen as founded on a prior scrutiny of the evidence for assuming others to be reliable judges. To respect the judgment of others only in so far as one has personally verified their reliability is, in effect, to regard oneself as the sole competent authority, and the conflict between that view and reason goes deeper than mere conflict with the available evidence. Reason itself requires that we recognise the judgments of others, as expressed in what they say, as having a claim on our judgment independently of any considerations of an evidential nature. But it is just such unmediated respect for others as judges of truth and falsehood which underlies the entitlements and obligations invoked in section V. We cannot, then, dismiss the justification they furnish for believing what we are told as somehow less than fully rational.

VIII

It follows that we cannot, short of breaking the link between reason and knowledge, deny that this kind of non-evidential justification is, sometimes at least, sufficient to yield knowledge. It is clear, though, that it is not *always* sufficient for knowledge, and not simply because a belief must also be true if it is to count as knowledge. Your telling me that P can only be said to provide me with knowledge if *you* know that P. Language is a means by which knowledge may be transmitted, not created *ex nihilo*. The question, then, is whether the present account allows us to see being told something by someone who knows as furnishing us with knowledge.

Our answer to this question must depend on what we think is lacking in the justification provided by the mere fact of having been told. If we think that what is wrong is that this justification is non-evidential, or if we think there is something wrong with any justification which places the responsibility for the truth of our beliefs on somebody else, we will fail to see why it should make any difference that the speaker is possessed of knowledge — which is itself a reason for being suspicious of those diagnoses. Let us begin by asking what sort of a justification the mere fact of having been told *does* provide.

If it means anything to say that we are entitled to believe what we are told, it means that, where we have been told (and have believed) something false, although what we *believe* will then be open to criticism, we will not ourselves be open to criticism for

having believed it. It means that we are in these circumstances absolved from the charge of not having taken due care over what we believe. If anyone is to be criticised on that score it will be our informant, or perhaps his informant. For a belief to be justified in this sense is for it — or rather the fact of one's believing it — to be *excusable*. I see no reason to suppose it amounts to any more than this, so let us assume, if only for the purposes of argument, that this is *all* it amounts to. It is not immediately obvious that in itself this makes it the wrong sort of justification to yield knowledge. The present suggestion involves, it is true, a slightly broader interpretation, but if 'taking due care over what we believe' is understood to mean believing only what we have good evidence for or what can be arrived at by legitimate processes of inference from known data, then the idea of excusable belief looks very much like the familiar notion of justified belief that figures in discussions of the conditions for knowledge. And the charge of being careless over what one believes can be leveled even where the belief at issue is true, so the question of whether a belief is excusable arises in those circumstances too: we can ask of a true belief whether it is justified in this sense.

All the same, even where what renders one's belief excusable is one's own care and vigilance in examining the evidence and drawing conclusions, it is clear that we cannot equate knowledge with excusable true belief. Most obviously this account of knowledge falls foul of Gettier style counter-examples showing how one can arrive at a true conclusion by a reasonable process of inference and still not qualify as knowing it to be true.²¹ Of course, if such examples are taken as showing that *no* notion of justification will allow us to equate knowledge with justified true belief, then the fact that they block the equation of knowledge with excusable true belief tells us little; but as we shall see, this is not the only sense in which we might require a belief to be justified. Equally serious, if less immediately fatal, is the fact that an equation of knowledge with excusable true belief leaves us without a satisfactory account of why the requirements of justification (= excusability) and truth should be linked in this way. The fact is that we have a very considerable use for the term 'knowledge' but have no word at all connoting excusable belief, yet on this account someone with knowledge would be someone who had simply been both careful and lucky in his judgments. In so far as we are con-

²¹ E. L. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis* 1963

cerned with the excusability of a judgment, its truth or falsity is surely irrelevant, and *vice versa*. We lack a convincing rationale for the structure of the concept this analysis represents us as employing, and that may remain the position even if we succeed in meeting the Gettier counter-examples by adding further conditions to the analysis in addition to justification and truth.

Another possibility, then, is that the justification required for knowledge is something more than mere excusability. In what other sense might a belief be said to be justified? Ideally, what we want is to identify a context in which or a perspective from which justification and truth are joint and connected desiderata. We do not in fact have far to look, for one important context in which we employ the notion of knowledge is that of communication. Let us ask why we are interested in whether or not someone is *speaking* from knowledge.

Our primary concern here is not with whether the speaker is personally open to censure, either for believing what he says or for saying it. The sense in which he is justified has to be one that recommends not just *him* but what he is *saying*, and recommends it to *us*, his hearers, as something fit to be believed. The question of whether it is fit to be believed is of course, in the end, the question of whether it is true, but that is likely to be a question we are not ourselves in a position to make a direct judgment on. The situation may also be complicated by the presence of other speakers urging contrary views. Our problem is whether to accept this speaker's judgment rather than someone else's, or whether we should simply suspend judgment. In attributing knowledge to a speaker we are saying that he is someone to be listened to, we are attributing to him a certain authority, an authority to determine what ought to be believed, by us or by anyone. In speaking at all (without a qualifying 'I think. . .' or 'I believe. . .' or other contextual indication to the contrary) a speaker implicitly claims such authority; in attributing knowledge to him we endorse that claim.

A justification that qualifies a speaker as possessing knowledge must, then, be a justification we can see as entitling not just the speaker but ourselves, anyone in fact, to believe what he is saying. It must be one we can endorse as valid in this sense for anyone, and valid given the situation as we see it, valid in the light of what *we* know. It is not enough that we can see the speaker as having been warranted in believing (and saying) what he did given the information available to him at the time. Thus for us to count him

as justified in the present sense we must be prepared to regard what he says as true, for otherwise we cannot endorse his justification as one that would entitle anyone to believe what he says. From this perspective, truth is not a further, adventitious requirement; rather justification, properly understood, implies truth. Similarly, even if what a speaker says is true, we will be unwilling to see his justification for believing it as of the right sort to warrant the attribution of knowledge if, in the light of what *we* know to be the case, this justification can be seen to depend on his having made some false (albeit excusable) assumptions, on his ignorance of seemingly conflicting evidence, or on his having (excusably) failed to consider alternative hypotheses that in our view should be given a hearing. For we will then be unable to regard the circumstances which justified (excused) the speaker in believing what he believed as circumstances which, all things considered, justify *us* in believing it.

Lehrer and others have suggested, in a similar spirit, that if one is to count as knowing something one's justification for believing it must be 'undefeated'.²² It would be a mistake, however, to see either the fact of one's justification being undefeated or, as we have put it, the fact of its being endorsable as a *further* requirement additional to that of justification. It is rather a question of the term 'justification' having a different sense in this context. If 'justified' here simply meant 'excusable', further information of which we are at present unaware could defeat our justification for believing something only in the sense that, were we to become aware of that information, we would no longer be justified in holding that belief. The existence of such information could not render it false that we are now, while ignorant of it, justified in holding our belief, in the way that it could render it false that the belief amounts to knowledge. To conceive of our *of* justification for believing something as defeasible in this latter, stronger sense is already to employ a notion of justification stronger than that of mere excusability. Similarly, if excusability is all that is at stake, to endorse an individual's justification for believing something will be to do no more than endorse the claim that his believing it is (or was) excusable. It will not be to endorse his justification as one that justifies *us*, knowing what we do, in believing it. The ques-

²² Keith Lehrer, 'Knowledge, Truth and Evidence', *Analysis* 1965; Keith Lehrer and Thomas D. Paxson, 'Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief', *Journal of Philosophy* 1969.

tion of endorsement in this latter sense, endorsement of a kind that may be withheld on account of information of which the individual concerned is unaware, only arises where what is at issue is justification in a stronger sense than mere excusability. And if it is justification in this stronger sense that is at issue, it does not, strictly speaking, need to be added that the knower's justification must be undefeated or one we can endorse. A defeated or unendorable justification is simply not a justification.

IX

Let us return now to the question of whether the entitlement to believe what we are told which arises from the speaker's responsibility for its truth can ever be sufficient for knowledge. If this entitlement never amounts to more than its being excusable that we believe it, the answer will have to be no. The possibility remains, however, that our entitlement to believe what we are told sometimes amounts to something stronger, and not simply because we often possess good inductive grounds for assuming the speaker to be reliable. (That would not in itself render us justified in a sense stronger than mere excusability, as the Gettier examples show.) To ask whether A's having told B that P has furnished B with knowledge is, on the present account, to ask whether B's justification for believing that P is one we can see as entitling us, knowing what we know, to believe that P. But since B's justification (what justifies B) is simply the fact of A's having said that P, our question amounts to asking whether we can see that fact as entitling us to believe that P. And that, we have argued, is precisely to ask whether A is speaking from knowledge. Thus it is a direct consequence of the present account of the conditions under which we may attribute knowledge that we can regard a hearer as acquiring knowledge provided only that we can regard the speaker as himself speaking from knowledge.

This result is reassuringly in accord with intuition, but it is actually a slight oversimplification. Even where we are prepared to grant that the speaker was speaking from knowledge, it may still be possible for the hearer's justification for believing what he is told to forfeit our endorsement. We may, for example, be aware that what he was told is the subject of dispute, and that, unlike the speaker, he is unaware of the other side of the argument and, were it to be presented to him, would be at a loss as to what to believe. In such circumstances, being told by a competent authority might

(might) be deemed insufficient to render the hearer a competent authority. But the possibility of things going wrong in this and perhaps other ways is no ground for denying that in the normal case, when all goes well, this is a way of acquiring knowledge. The simple entitlement to believe something which arises from having been told it is not of the wrong *sort* to have the general validity required for knowledge. Indeed, if we cannot see the fact that A has said that P as entitling *any* normally competent hearer to believe that P then we cannot see it as entitling *us* to believe that P. (Or not at least in the way that being told something normally entitles one to believe it. I ignore cases in which we are able to see the fact that A has said that P as *evidence* that P for some convoluted reason that is apparent only to those in the know.) Perhaps we should see it as an important feature of the 'normal' case that the hearer should possess some capacity for distinguishing competent authorities from incompetent ones, though once more, we must be careful not to pitch this requirement so high that we rule out the possibility of young children acquiring knowledge from their elders. No doubt inductive considerations often play a part in helping us to make such discriminations, but that is no reason for insisting that our grounds for believing a speaker must be wholly inductive in character before we count as having acquired knowledge from him.

X

To see the idea of knowledge as the idea of a certain sort of authority is not to deny that it is the idea of a very *special* sort of authority. We have said that it is the authority to determine what ought to be believed, but that does not in itself distinguish knowledge from the kind of authority possessed by an umpire or a jury, from the authority to determine what ought to be believed which derives from one's status within a specific human institution. Knowledge, we may want to say, is an authority which derives from natural rather than institutional facts, from one's reliability as a judge of, and one's position, advantageous or otherwise, in relation to the facts of which one claims knowledge. But in distinguishing knowledge from the kind of authority which derives from a specific social position, we must not make the mistake of focussing exclusively on the individual in abstraction from his relationship with other knowers. Like many other kinds of authority — indeed more than most — knowledge is transmissible;

it is an authority one may acquire from others. We must not allow a preoccupation with the origins of knowledge to distort our view of the conditions under which one can be said to possess it.

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