

Default Rule (DR):

If the speaker S asserts that p to the hearer H, under normal conditions, then it is proper or correct for H to accept S's assertion, unless H has special reason to object.

5. Reductionism and its Critics

The view that our ordinary acceptance of testimony is justified only a posteriori has been referred to as the “reductionist thesis” for implying that testimony, unlike perception, is not a fundamental source of warrant. The acceptance of testimony resides in other familiar sources of justification, notably perception, memory, and induction (Hume 1978 Bk I part III section IV). The anti-reductionist admits that testimony depends on other sources like perception, and not conversely. The dependence, he claims, is only psychological—one perceives testimony by hearing. But the epistemic warrant or justification for accepting testimony need not essentially appeal to these other sources. It may refer only to the speaker's knowledge, his word-giving, and other principles that are purely testimonial (see Audi 1997; related claims are made by Coady 1992, for criticisms, Fricker 1995, Graham 2000b).

On an anti-reductionist view, the basic principle is something like the DR. A reductionist, by contrast, endorses basic principles like the following:

If a hearer comes to believe a speaker's testimony in normal ways based on the speaker's so testifying and the hearer's background and current evidence, then the hearer is epistemically entitled to believe it.

The anti-reductionist moves from an antecedent specifying a certain natural position or relation to a normative consequent. The reductionist requires a normative condition in the antecedent (“based on”), although this may take the form of the DR on a normative reading of “normal conditions”. Strictly, the reductionism and anti-reductionism need not be incompatible. The same testimonial transmission can be justified either way, so that justification can be overdetermined, meeting both inferential and non-inferential conditions (Graham, 2006). We will assume that they are incompatible, which is how they are generally presented, with each explicitly denying that at the foundations there is need or room for the other.

Hume is taken as the main proponent of reductionism, due largely to the views he expresses in “Of Miracles”, an essay directed to the warrant for accepting testimony of miracles. (On testimony for the supernatural, see Coady 1994.) Key statements are these:

our assurance in any argument of this kind [from testimony] is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. (Hume 1977 74)

The reason, why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any connexion, which we perceive a priori, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. (Hume 1977 75)

On the usual readings of these passages, each instance of testimonial transmission is justified only by an implicit record of the agent's ratio of past testimonial success or that of the type of testimony or the type of agent. (For discussion of Hume's views on testimony wary of the usual readings, see Traiger 1993; Faulkner 1998.) If so, a Humean view would be in opposition to the DR, which is the basis for the standard contrast to a "Reidian" view:

Reid's position is that any assertion is creditworthy until shown otherwise; whereas Hume implies that specific evidence for its reliability is needed. (Stevenson 1993, 433, Wolterstorff 2001, Audi 2006)

The Reidian account of testimonial trust is that since God intended us to be 'social creatures', he implanted in us "a propensity to speak the truth" (the principle of veracity), as well as, correspondingly "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us." (The principle of credulity) (Reid 1983 94–95).

The Reidian-Humean contrast needs tempering, however, if the usual way to obtain specific evidence is by checking on the reliability and sincerity of a speaker. For then testimony would not be feasible as a regular habit or practice, clearly violating the Infeasibility of Checking claim. Testimony would not conform to the Far-reaching Dependence thesis, which Hume endorses. Unless Hume is terribly confused, there must be ways to have evidence favoring the acceptance of testimony that does not involve burdensome checks on the credentials of particular speakers (section 6).

If the transmission of beliefs through testimony is as common and successful as Hume affirms, then, an objection to Humean reductionism is that any attempt to justify testimony through an inductive inference will inevitably be circular, since among the justificatory grounds will almost certainly be grounds obtained through testimony (Coady 1992). This criticism assumes that to justify reliance on testimony overall or in a particular case, bars appeal to evidence of past testimonial success. The latter is thought tainted, since itself derived from testimony, even if not the current testimony. But it is not evident that this assumption is correct, or that the restriction would not equally exclude justification of perception (by its 'track record') (Alston 1993).

A related objection is that the reductionist view is not empirically feasible:

In our ordinary dealings with others we gather information without this concern for inferring the acceptability of communications from premises about honesty, reliability, probability, etc.

of our communicants. I ring up the telephone company on being unable to locate my bill and am told by an anonymous voice that it comes to \$165 and is due on 15 June. No thought of determining the veracity and reliability of the witness occurs to me nor...does the balancing of probabilities figure in my acceptance. (Coady 1992 143; for similar concerns, Audi 1997)

This criticism is, though, subject to objections that it conflates the epistemic and the psychological (Burge 1997). Schiffer objects along these lines:

Whether knowing p is based on knowing q, isn't about the actual movement of thought, the considerations one actually ponders; it's about the structure of beliefs that sustain one's conclusion. (Schiffer 2003 303; Fricker 1995)

If the automaticity of our response to testimony is not decisive for whether the epistemic basis is a priori, innate, or empirical, then, similarly, the Uniformity claim, as confirming our conformity to the DR, is not evidence that our trust in speakers is 'blind'. Hearers may be very sensitive to when speakers are unreliable or insincere. But this sensitivity is only occasionally displayed, since speakers' testimony is by and large correct, at least in core cases.

Another difficulty alleged against the Humean is that his denial of any a priori connection "between testimony and reality" implies that

we might have discovered (though in fact we did not) that there was no conformity at all between testimony and reality. (Coady 1992 85)

If Hume does allow for this discovery, it would be difficult to understand how the practice of testimony persists so robustly, since the failings would undermine trust. But the result also suggests that Hume need not allow for the possibility (Lyons 1997, Schmitt 1994). The demand to empirically justify reliance on testimony does not entail that there are not necessary conditions, like a minimal correspondence between what is asserted and what is the case, that must be satisfied for the practice to be sustained. There is no a priori connection between private swimming pools and wealth. Yet, a high level of wealth may be a major necessary condition for the continued construction of private swimming pools.

Still, if Hume allows for the possibility of a world in which testimony and reality are discovered not to match, a further, related, difficulty is held to arise:

whenever they [the 'Martians'] construct sentences addressed to each other in the absence (from their vicinity) of the things designated by the names, but when they are, as we should think, in a position to report, then they seem to say what we (more synoptically placed) can observe to be false. But in such a situation what reason would there be for believing that they even had the practice of reporting? (Coady 1992, 85).

These various objections culminate in an argument that the Humean position lapses into incoherence. Meaning or content, as well as language learning, are claimed to be impossible absent an a priori connection of testimony and truth. For if we are constantly frustrated in checking the truth of our attempts to translate native utterances, we thereby undermine our claim to understand, or even to attribute content, to them (Coady 1992 93–97, Ch.9; for criticisms Graham 2000b).

The argument, broadly understood, is derived from Davidson, who holds that it is a conceptual truth that a language is only possible where most of what is believed is true. Davidson's argument concludes that a principle of charity is necessary in interpreting the assertions of others. The Principle of Charity, which assumes that interpretation is holistic, requires that we attribute rationality to speakers in interpreting them. The Principle of Charity implies that the speaker's beliefs are predominantly like our own, and, more disputably, that they are predominantly true (Davidson 1984).

However, even if these Davidsonian claims hold, there is a barrier to transferring them to testimony. The vast, shared collection of beliefs that, in Davidson's words, are “too dull, trite, or familiar to stand notice,” dwarfs by comparison the set of beliefs likely to be expressed in testimony, since the latter are presented only on the presumption of their informativeness to hearers. But if testimony is informative, the assertions are among the riskier constituents of our vast background of ‘dull’ beliefs. Consequently, they are lesser candidates for Davidson's a priori interpretational justification. Among the beliefs a priori guaranteed of truth by the Davidson-type reasoning would be ones like there is an earth, $2+2=4$, bacteria do not study physics. Except under unusual circumstances, these are not the kind of beliefs that it would be informative to assert (see Adler 1994, Fricker 1995, Elgin 2002a; for broader doubts about a Davidsonian approach, Ebbs 2002).

Nevertheless, the Davidsonian view can still play a prominent role in a coherence type justification of testimony. The more informative beliefs that are expressed in assertion are required to cohere with our vast background of shared beliefs if they are to achieve the minimal credibility or plausibility requisite for hearers to accept them. If Davidson is right, this coherence requirement sets a high epistemic bar, though such a requirement is not unique to anti-reductionism.

In this section, we have focused mainly on attempts at a priori refutations of reductionism. But we have not yet provided detailed models of reductionism, which we do in the next two sections.