Marianne Talbot Essay Prize Trinity 2026

Second Prize: Giulia Sciorati

How Far Should Testimonial Reductionism Go?
Source Scrutiny and the Limits of Reductionist Justification

Introduction

Much of what we take ourselves to know depends on testimony. Beliefs about history, science, politics, and distant places and events we have not witnessed are generally acquired from others and not through direct observation. This means that testimony extends knowledge beyond individual experience. This extension creates an epistemic problem because speakers providing testimony can be mistaken, dishonest, incompetent, or merely influenced by institutions seeking to shape what others believe.

Global reductionism responds to this problem by arguing that testimonial justification requires positive grounds for believing that the speaker, source, or relevant class of testimony is reliable. These grounds must ultimately derive from non-testimonial sources (Pritchard, 2023). Although this position helps distinguish responsible trust from gullibility, the distinction between local and non-local matters places pressure on it because much of our knowledge concerns matters that we cannot personally investigate (Pritchard, 2023). Propaganda provides a useful test case, as it makes source scrutiny especially important and may coordinate apparently separate sources in ways that hearers cannot independently detect. Global reductionism is therefore defensible as an account of responsible source scrutiny, but not as a universal theory of testimonial justification. A credulist position, sensitive to epistemic defeaters and supplemented by a reliabilist externalist condition, provides a more convincing account of testimonial knowledge.

Reductionism: its attraction and its limits

The vulnerability of testimony outlined above gives initial strength to a global reductionist view. As seen, global reductionism argues that testimony does not provide an independent source of justification because a hearer must have positive grounds for believing that the speaker, source, or relevant class of testimony is reliable, and those grounds themselves must ultimately derive from non-testimonial sources (Pritchard, 2023). Even though the hearer does not require independent proof that each reported proposition is true, she/he does need reasons for thinking that a source is likely to speak truthfully and competently.

Hume provides a classical argument often associated with this position. He argues that confidence in testimony arises from experience of a regular conformity between what witnesses report and what is found to be true (Hume, 1748/2007, sec. 10). Locke offers a related account by arguing that the weight given to testimony should depend on the number, integrity, and competence of the witnesses, the purposes behind their account, its internal consistency, and the presence of contrary testimony (Locke, 1689/2002). Fricker, in turn, defends a more local reductionist position in which hearers assess particular speakers and testimonial exchanges instead of attempting to establish the general reliability of testimony. Hearers should

then monitor whether a speaker appears sincere, competent, and suitably placed to know what they claim (Fricker, 1994). Such monitoring allows the epistemic weight of testimony to vary according to sources and circumstances. Yet, the distinction between local and non-local matters begins to expose the limitations of global reductionism. In *The Truman Show*, for instance, Truman can sometimes compare what people tell him about his immediate surroundings with his own observations. He has far fewer opportunities to check claims about the world beyond his artificial environment. His beliefs about these non-local matters thus depend almost entirely on testimony (Pritchard, 2023).

Propaganda provides a political version of this problem. Suppose government officials, newspapers, and television reports all claim that a protest was organised by foreign actors. Their agreement may look like a form of corroboration, although every report originates from the same government institution. Repetition through several outlets would then create the appearance of independent testimony without providing independent corroboration of the underlying claim. A reductionist would thus reasonably ask whether the sources are genuinely independent, informed, and free from incentives to mislead. Citizens, however, may have no direct access to the event or to the institutional relations connecting the sources. Even their evidence about media ownership and official reliability may come from further testimony. As Coady argues, reliance on others is too extensive and fundamental to be reconstructed entirely through individual inductive checks (Coady, 1992). Global reductionism therefore appears too demanding as a general theory. Local source-monitoring remains epistemically valuable, but the global position still struggles to explain how testimony extends knowledge beyond what individuals can personally verify.

Credulism, externalism, and the propaganda challenge

These limitations give force to the credulist alternative. Credulism is the testimonial non-reductionist position this essay adopts. It holds that testimony can provide *prima facie* justification without the hearer first possessing positive, non-testimonial evidence that the speaker is reliable (Pritchard, 2023). This helps explain how children learn from adults, and how people acquire knowledge about history, science, politics, and distant places or events. Reid, above all, provides a classical basis for this alternative through his principles of veracity and credulity. The principle of veracity describes a general human tendency to communicate truthfully, while the principle of credulity describes our natural disposition to believe what others tell us. This disposition is particularly strong in children and is subsequently qualified through experience of deceit and error (Reid, 1764/2002).

Under credulism, the initial entitlement to accept testimony is defeasible because it can be removed when there is evidence that the speaker is dishonest, incompetent, poorly informed, inconsistent, or strategically motivated. Burge argues more specifically that hearers have a *prima facie* entitlement – a form of warrant not based on reasons – to accept claims presented as true, absent stronger contrary reasons (Burge, 1993). This entitlement differs from justification grounded in reasons available to the hearer. However, possessing such an entitlement is not itself sufficient for knowledge, which still requires more than the hearer's reasonable or blameless acceptance of a claim. In simpler terms, while reductionists require positive grounds for trust before testimonial belief is justified, credulists allow for initial acceptance unless grounds for doubt arise.

The strongest objection to credulism is that its presumption in favour of testimony appears to encourage gullibility, especially in an environment shaped by propaganda. For the purposes of this example, a distinction can be drawn between visible and hidden propaganda. In the visible case, a citizen knows that government officials, newspapers, and television reports are coordinated, that contrary accounts have been suppressed, and that the sources have an interest in securing acceptance of their claims. These facts operate as undercutting defeaters because they remove the assumption that several reports offer a form of independent corroboration. Credulism would therefore not preserve the initial entitlement to accept the testimony merely because it had been repeated. Hidden propaganda, in contrast, creates a harder case. Suppose the reports appear independent and the citizen has no accessible reason to suspect that they come from a coordinated source. The citizen may be reasonable and blameless in accepting the claim. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that the resulting belief constitutes knowledge. On a reliabilist form of epistemic externalism, whether a belief amounts to knowledge depends partly on factors beyond the hearer's awareness, including whether the process producing the belief is sufficiently reliable (Pritchard, 2023). If the propagandistic testimony is false, the citizen plainly lacks knowledge. Even if the claim happens to be true, a belief produced through a systematically unreliable process may be correct only by luck.

The position adopted in this essay, therefore, combines defeater-sensitive credulism with a reliabilist externalist condition. In sum, this position can account for ordinary testimonial knowledge because it does not require hearers to independently verify every source before accepting testimony. Yet its sensitivity to defeaters preserves the practical point that sources should be investigated when circumstances provide specific reasons for suspicion.

Conclusion

Global reductionism is defensible only in a limited sense. Its strength lies in insisting that evidence about a source's honesty, competence, independence, motives, and previous reliability can affect whether testimonial acceptance is justified. This is especially important where apparently separate sources may be coordinated or where speakers have incentives to mislead. However, global reductionism is too demanding as a general theory of testimonial justification. Much of what people know concerns matters that they cannot investigate directly, including assessments of source reliability that frequently depend on further testimony.

Credulism provides a more convincing account because it allows testimony to supply *prima facie* justification while leaving that entitlement open to defeat. A reliabilist externalist condition is also needed because reasonable or blameless acceptance of testimony does not itself amount to knowledge. The propaganda example helps clarify this distinction. Visible coordination among sources may undercut testimonial justification, while hidden coordination may leave the hearer reasonable even when the resulting belief is false or produced through an unreliable process. Global reductionism should therefore be adopted as a principle of responsible source scrutiny but rejected as a universal account of testimonial justification.

Bibliography

Burge, T. (1993) 'Content preservation', *The Philosophical Review*, 102(4), pp. 457-488.

Coady, C. A. J. (1992) *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Fricker, E. (1994) 'Against gullibility', in Matilal, B. K. and Chakrabarti, A. (eds) *Knowing from Words: Western and Indian Philosophical Analysis of Understanding and Testimony*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 125-161.

Hume, D. (1748/2007) *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by P. Millican. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Huemer, M. (2002) 'Testimony', in Huemer, M. (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*. London: Routledge, pp. 217-218.

Locke, J. (1689/2002) 'Essay concerning human understanding', in Huemer, M. (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*. London: Routledge, pp. 219-220.

Pritchard, D. (2023) *What Is This Thing Called Knowledge?* 5th edn. Abingdon: Routledge.

Reid, T. (1764/2002) 'Inquiry into the human mind', in Huemer, M. (ed.) *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*. London: Routledge, pp. 234-238.