

## TESTIMONY AS A SOURCE OF UNDERSTANDING?

*Unlike for knowledge, a speaker S's testimonial telling that  $p$  does not seem to suffice for a hearer H to acquire understanding about  $p$ . The general idea is that understanding requires H's own ability to grasp the relations among the propositions she is being told. On this view, H may come to know that  $p$  from S's testimonial telling that  $p$ , yet fail to gain understanding about  $p$  when she cannot make up her own mind about  $p$ . Our claim in this paper is that, contrary to appearances, understanding may be acquired via testimony, although the conditions under which this is possible differ significantly from those for acquiring knowledge. More specifically, we claim that the transmission of understanding in testimony places additional cognitive demands on both speaker and hearer.*

The traditional debate on testimony has so far focused on how knowledge that  $p$  is transmitted from a speaker S to a hearer H. Suppose that  $p$  is true, that S tells H that  $p$  and that H forms the testimonial belief that  $p$  upon S's telling that  $p$  – what does it take for H's belief that  $p$  to become testimonial *knowledge* that  $p$ ? What might be *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions for transmitting knowledge from S to H? As for the latter, there is widespread agreement about the truth of the following principle:

- C<sub>1</sub>: If S knows that  $p$  and tells H that  $p$ , and if H believes that  $p$  on the basis of S's testimony and has no defeaters for S's telling, then justification for  $p$  is transferred from S to H so that H thereby comes to know that  $p$ .

This principle tells us that the fact that S knows that  $p$  (on the assumption that S sincerely communicates that  $p$  to H and that H takes her word for it) is sufficient for H to acquire testimony-based knowledge that  $p$ . This is so, other things being equal, because justification for  $p$  is preserved, i.e. it is transferred from a knowledgeable source to a recipient. The prospects for finding a similar principle stating necessary conditions, however, look dim. Consider the following attempt:

- C<sub>2</sub>: In order for H to obtain testimonial knowledge that  $p$  from the S, S must herself have knowledge that  $p$ .

Lackey (2008) and Graham (2006), among others, have challenged C<sub>2</sub> by trying to show that S's having knowledge that  $p$  is *not necessary* for H's acquiring knowledge that  $p$  upon S's telling. According to them, there are plausible scenarios in which S lacks knowledge that  $p$  herself (either because S is not justified in believing that  $p$  or because S does not believe that  $p$ , or both), and S still counts as a reliable source of knowledge that  $p$  for H. If correct, Lackey's and Graham's scenarios support a view according to which there are cases in which testimony is a genuinely *generative* source of knowledge and does not merely function to transmit or preserve knowledge that is already given (either on the part of the speaker, or somewhere in the chain of communication connected to the hearer).

Having said that, interesting issues arise once we begin to ask whether or not *understanding* can be transmitted via testimony. It seems that a speaker S's testimonial telling that  $p$  does not suffice for a hearer H to acquire understanding about  $p$ , or the fact that  $p$ . The general idea is that understanding requires H's own ability to grasp the relations among the propositions she is being told. On this view, H may come to know that  $p$  from S's testimonial telling that  $p$ , yet fail to understand the fact that  $p$  when she cannot make up her own mind about  $p$  (i.e. when she is not able to appropriately embed  $p$  in a system of propositions). We certainly do not dispute this possibility: intuitively, there is a striking asymmetry between the testimonial transmission of

knowledge and that of understanding. Other things being equal, we take it that the sufficiency conditions specified in  $C_1$  are correct. If  $C_1$  is satisfied, a hearer will successfully obtain testimonial knowledge from a speaker. The situation seems to be radically different for *understanding*. The fact that a speaker has understanding that  $p$ , intends to share it and tries to communicate it in a comprehensible manner to somebody trusting her word *does not seem to suffice* for a hearer to acquire understanding the fact that  $p$  upon  $S$ 's testimony. This remark seems to support a view which denies the very possibility of testimonial understanding (Hills 2009). Followers of this view might argue that the way towards understanding can be paved or facilitated, and that understanding can certainly be promoted in the right circumstances, but *properly speaking* it cannot be transmitted through testimony from a speaker to a hearer. Although we agree that acquiring understanding from others may be more difficult (cognitively more demanding and more prone to failure) than simply acquiring bits of knowledge, we claim that  $S$ 's testimonial telling that  $p$  to  $H$  can at least sometimes transmit  $S$ 's understanding to  $H$  or even generate  $H$ 's understanding about  $p$  in cases where  $S$ 's understanding is absent. We make the following claims:

- (i) Testimonial understanding is sometimes possible (i.e. that there are cases in which a hearer comes to understand the fact that  $p$  on the basis of someone's testimony, and could not have acquired this understanding by other means), and that
- (ii) Extra-conditions (in comparison to knowledge-transmission) are required for the testimonial transmission of understanding to be successful.

These extra conditions amount to certain cognitive abilities and dispositions both on the part of the speaker and of the hearer, or so we will argue. Concerning the hearer's part, we will suggest that what is required is a certain flexibility in cognitive reflection, i.e. a disposition to revise and, if necessary, re-organize (sometimes radically) her own belief-system. Crucially, we maintain that even though a hearer has to engage in reflection herself, the way in which she reflects about a given phenomenon can be substantially shaped by a speaker's testimony. More specifically, in testimony,  $S$  may tell  $H$  how to safely derive a conclusion  $C$  about an object  $O$  from certain premises  $P$  and thereby enable  $H$  to perform this very derivation, something which  $H$  would not have been able to without  $S$ 's telling.

As far as the speaker's part is concerned, we will suggest that what is required is an ability to make those background assumptions and presumptions explicit that a hearer needs to know in order to grasp a subject matter. Typically, this involves expressing the dependency relations of different bits of propositional knowledge, which constitute the range in which the object of understanding falls.

We further differentiate cases of understanding-transmission in which speaker and hearer are epistemic peers from those in which they are not, i.e. where a speaker's epistemic situation is better than the hearer's. For the latter, we claim that a speaker who intends to transmit her understanding to a hearer who is epistemically worse off will have to act as a *Socratic epistemic authority* toward her (Jäger 2015). A Socratic epistemic authority does not merely provide a hearer with a preemptive reason for accepting a certain belief that  $p$ , but instead gives her an insight into the reasons for holding  $p$ , which will often involve telling a hearer how to derive  $p$  from a certain the background set of beliefs that is made accessible to her.

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