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Learning from Words – Testimony as a Source of Knowledge, by Jennifer Lackey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xii+295. H/b £35.00.

Learning from Words is the first monograph on testimony since Coady's *Testimony* was published in 1992. It brings together, and adds to, the papers that Lackey has already published on this topic. By doing so it presents a sustained, and engaging, argument for a distinctive epistemological position.

Lackey argues for two principal claims. The first is that testimonial knowledge and justification are a collaborative product. She labels this view *dualism*, and it consists of combining the reductionist idea that the acceptance of testimony must be justified by other things an audience believes with the non-reductive claim that testimony is nevertheless irreducible as a source of knowledge and justification. How this combination should be understood then requires reference to Lackey's second principal claim, which is the rejection of what she terms the *belief view of testimony* and the endorsement of the *statement view of testimony* in its place. We should focus on testimony as a statement, and not as an expression of belief. She favours this statement view because we can supposedly imagine cases where reliability in belief and reliability of testimony come apart ('consistent liar' discussed further below), so we should not, as audiences and theorists, be interested in the sincerity and competence of a speaker as believer as such, but should focus on the competence of a speaker as a producer of reliable testimony. An immediate worry with her position, however, is how this focus on testimony as a statement is compatible with Lackey's desire to make the category of testimony broad enough to include non-verbal communication. In arguing, to my mind correctly, against Coady's definition of testimony Lackey considers the case where "Randall asks me whether there is any coffee left in the kitchen and I respond with a nod of the head" (p.25). Lackey is surely right to regard this nod as telling Randall something. However, to be a testimonial belief on the statement view, an audience's belief that *p* must be "appropriately connected with the content of [a speaker] A's statement" (p.76); or, more cautiously put, with the content of A's "act of communication" (p.39 n.1). But what, then, is the 'content' of nods, and other gestural acts of communication, that an audience's belief can be appropriately connected to? A good answer is arguably given by Grice. The content is what a speaker intends to convey by the act of communication, and this is the content the act represents the speaker as believing. Thus the 'content' of Lackey's nod to Randall is that she believes there is coffee left in the kitchen. If this is the case, then in order to be testimonial, an audience's belief must *be appropriately connected to that belief a speaker purportedly expresses*. However, isn't this just the belief view?

Not quite. It is what the belief view would be if it were like the statement view merely a view about the identity of testimonial belief, but as Lackey defines it the belief view is more substantial than this. It is the view that "testimony involves a speaker transmitting her belief to a hearer, along with the epistemic properties it possesses" (p.38). The belief view is thereby also a view about the identity of

testimonial knowledge. It is the view that testimonial knowledge is transmitted knowledge. Lackey's rejection of this view then raises the question of how her dualism can be non-reductive? Dualism purportedly embraces the non-reductive idea that testimony is irreducible as a source of knowledge and justification, but the ordinary way of understanding this idea is just in terms of testimony functioning to transmit knowledge and justification. Lackey understands the irreducibility of testimony differently. In her opinion, dualism is non-reductive because it places a 'speaker condition' on the audiences acquisition of testimonial knowledge and justification. This is the condition that the speaker's statement, or act of communication, be reliable. This reliability "is not something that can be reduced", and so "there *is* justification, and hence knowledge, that is distinctly testimonial in nature" (p.193). Thus, dualism is the reductive demand for reasons combined with the demand that testimony be reliable; an audience's acquisition of testimonial knowledge is the product, other things being equal, of the audience satisfying an 'audience condition' and having reasons for belief, and the speaker satisfying a 'speaker condition' and being a reliable reporter. In this sense, testimonial knowledge is a collaborative product.

So far I have simply outlined the logical space Lackey's view occupies. I come now to the case that she puts in its favour. This case could be presented in terms of two questions. Why deny the belief view? That is, why deny transmission? And why not simply embrace the reductive position?

Lackey breaks the claim that testimony functions to transmit knowledge and justification down into a necessity claim and a sufficiency claim. Respectively: an audience *A* knows that *p* on the basis of a speaker *S*'s testimony only if *S* knows that *p*; and if *S* knows that *p* and *A* believes that *p* on the basis of *S*'s testimony, then, other things being equal, *A* knows that *p*. I have no disagreement with denying the sufficiency claim; like Lackey I think that there is an 'audience condition' on the acquisition of testimonial knowledge: the acceptance of testimony must be rationally supported by other things an audience believes. And I think this for the same reason as Lackey; like her I think that the acceptance of testimony "in the complete absence of positive reasons can be just as epistemically irrational" as belief in the face of counter-evidence (p.170). Thus Lackey's counterexamples to the necessity claim are by far the more important, to my mind. They are also more important for Lackey's argument with the belief view because the idea that testimony functions to transmit knowledge and justification *is consistent with* placing an audience condition on the acquisition of testimonial knowledge, and so consistent with the falsity of the sufficiency claim as stated. Moreover, this consistent pair – transmission plus an audience condition – constitutes an alternative 'dualist' position. This position is the *hybrid* view I have argued for ("The Social Character of Testimonial Knowledge", *Journal of Philosophy* 2000). Lackey acknowledges this structural similarity, observing "While Faulkner endorses a view that is in some ways similar to the dualist view … he espouses [transmission], which I rejected." (p.142, n.1). Lackey's rejection of the idea that testimony functions to transmit knowledge and justification, her rejection of the belief view, then consists

of an argument by counter-example, and this argument turns on the cases she offers as counterexamples to the necessity claim above. This argumentative strategy is a risky one. The problem is that in arguing against an established view – and it is important to the originality of Lackey's position that the belief view *is* the established view – one inherits a burden of proof, so any argument by counterexample must involve a case that is *entirely plausible and not open to reinterpretation*. Lackey's cases, which follow, do not come near satisfying this desideratum.

Case number one is that of the "creationist teacher" (p.48). A devout Christian but law-abiding teacher, Stella teaches evolutionary theory but does not believe what she teaches. Letting '*p*' refer to some statement Stella makes about evolution, Stella does not believe that *p* and so does not know that *p* but her testimony puts her pupils in a position to know that *p*. So Lackey concludes the necessity claim is false. This case does not show this. Rather, what it shows is that the necessity claim is improperly formulated. It shows that speakers can pass on what others know, and that all that matters is that someone in the testimonial chain possesses knowledge that can be passed on. Lackey thinks that this response is problematic because it denies that Stella is "the source of the children's knowledge" (p.53). But the respone is not so unsubtle. Stella is the source of the children's testimonial belief that *p*, and it is true that this belief amounts to knowledge, but Stella is not the source of this knowledge that *p*. What explains the children's possession of knowledge is that Stella's testimony connects the children's belief to someone else who knows that *p*. This is the crux of the necessity claim: it is a view about the nature of testimonial knowledge, to wit that to possess testimonially based knowledge is to have the epistemic standing of another explain one's possession of knowledge. Lackey does not pick up on this equivocation in 'source' because she rejects the idea that testimony transmits knowledge, and so rejects the idea that testimony can be a source of knowledge *in this sense*.

Case number two is the "consistent liar" (p.53). This case is a little puzzling, but it runs as follows. Bertha has a brain lesion so that for some ordered set of animals $\{a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n\}$ when Bertha sees animal a_j she believes it is animal a_{j+1}. Bertha then has this lesion surgically modified so that when she decides to make a statement about animal a_{j+1} she makes it about animal a_j. Letting '*p*' refer to some statement Bertha makes about animal a_j, Bertha's belief concerns animal a_{j+1} so she does not believe that *p* and nor, therefore, know that *p*. But given that her testimony reliably reports what she sees to be the case it puts her audience in a position to know that *p*. So Lackey concludes the necessity claim is false. Certainly it is true that one could acquire knowledge from Bertha's testimony. One could treat Bertha as a thermometer and justify believing what she says on the basis of the reliability of her saying. This is the reductive model of testimonial knowledge and the view that testimony transmits knowledge and justification is consistent with this model in that it is consistent with our being able to learn inductively from testimony. The issue is what gives the best explanation of the central cases. For consistent liar to be a counterexample it has to be such a central case: one needs to think that the

knowledge acquired from Bertha is testimonial. Lackey does think this because she rejects the idea of transmission. However for the counterexample to work the advocate of transmission – the non-reductive theorist – must see knowledge acquired from Bertha as testimonial. As things are described it could never be so: Bertha knows nothing about animals (in the set $\{a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n\}$) and her testimony is a lie. Lackey might push the idea that this case is nevertheless central, saying "learning from Bertha's words falls under the general category picked out by paradigmatic instances of testimony" (p.56), but surely it is at least part of our conception of central cases that they involve others telling us what they believe to be the case? Yet this is something that Bertha is not in a position to do.

Cases three and four are structurally the same, where case four is "serious student" (p.61). Bartholomew is persuaded by scepticism, Audrey asks him directions to the nearest café and he tells her what he would know to be the case were he not in the grip of sceptical doubt. Letting '*p*' refer to Bartholomew's statement of the whereabouts of the café, Bartholomew is not justified in believing that *p* given that he believes that he is a brain-in-a-vat, so does not know that *p*. Nevertheless, Bartholomew's testimony puts Audrey in a position to know that *p*. So Lackey concludes the necessity claim is false. Now it is possible, like in the previous case, to explain Audrey's coming to know that *p* on the basis of her possessing evidence for Bartholomew's reliability. However, if this is to be a counterexample, this cannot be the nature of Audrey's knowledge. Rather, we must think both that Audrey's knowledge that *p* is testimonial, in the sense intended by those who advocate transmission, and that Bartholomew does *not* know that *p*. However, there is space to argue that this conjunction is only delivered by a failure to recognise the nature of testimonial knowledge. For suppose that Audrey's knowledge is testimonial in the required sense; if we suppose this, we are supposing that Bartholomew tells Audrey something he knows to be case, and so we are supposing that he *really knows* that *p*. This is not implausible; after all, since Hume, it has been observed that sceptical doubts tends to evaporate outside the study (or classroom). However, if we suppose that Bartholomew is *genuinely troubled*, and genuinely believes he is a brain-in-a-vat, then we must recognise that he tells Audrey that *p* despite thinking that *p* is false, or despite thinking that for all he knows, that *p* is false; from his perspective, what he says is just a stab in the dark. But then it seems that the only way Audrey could get to know that *p* is if she has independently good reasons for believing that *p*, such as that supplied by her belief that Bartholomew's word is reliable. Whilst Audrey acquires knowledge from testimony, on this understanding, her knowledge is not distinctively testimonial, so the case is not a counterexample to transmission.

These cases, to my mind, do not thereby offer conclusive counterexamples to the necessity claim since each is open to the reinterpretations given. However, in denying the necessity claim Lackey aligns her position, 'dualism', with reductive theory, which denies there is the epistemically distinctive type *testimonial knowledge*, identified in transmissive terms. This brings me to the second question. Why doesn't Lackey simply embrace the reductive position?

The reductive theory of testimony equates testimonial knowledge with inductive knowledge; testimony is just another phenomena in the world that can be treated as a sign for other things. As Lackey understands it the reductive theory is internalist: it is an audience's inductive reasons for belief that explain the audience's coming to possess testimonial knowledge. Now the reductive theory, I think, is best understood as internalist, since the intuition that we need *reasons* for accepting testimony is its primary motivation; but what is essential to the reductive theory is simply the reduction of testimonial knowledge to inductive knowledge, and the consequent denial that testimonial knowledge constitutes a distinctive epistemological type. Thus, an externalist reductive theory is possible, if one gives an externalist account of inductive knowledge. Lackey's case against the internalist reductive theory, then, again consists of a case, which she takes to constitute a counterexample. The case is "nested speaker" (p.149). Helen tells Fred that Pauline is reliable on birds, and Fred knows Helen can be trusted. So Fred believes what Pauline tells him about the albatross. But Pauline does not know what she is talking about, and is quite unreliable when it comes to birds. Letting '*p*' refer to Pauline's statement, what this case shows is that one can fail to have knowledge despite having inductive reasons which are good on any internalist account of justification. This is not, Lackey argues, because this is a Gettier case but because "the possession of positive reasons … *does not necessarily put one in contact with testimony that is reliable*" (p.150). So Lackey proposes a 'speaker condition' that specifies reliability. And since reliability is "not something that can be reduced" but is a necessary condition on justification, "there is justification, and hence knowledge, that is distinctly testimonial in nature" (p.193).

This argument against the reductive theory is rather uncharitable. It is true that reliability cannot "be reduced to perceptual, memorial and inferential justification": facts about objective probability are true independently of what we think; and the Humean problem of induction establishes that our reasons for thinking that these facts lie one way rather than another can never guarantee them to be that way. However, surely this case only illustrates what Lackey assumes: that any adequate account of justification cannot be solely internalist. So why burden the reductive theory with this restrictive conception of justification when the reductive theory is not essentially tied to this conception? Surely it is open to the reductive theory to adopt the same account of justification as Lackey and make reliability a necessary condition? In this case, 'nested speaker' would simply show that a sophisticated reductive account must distinguish a strong and a weak sense of justification. Fred has reasons: his acceptance of what Pauline tells him is *reasonable*. But Fred's reasons are not objectively good and justifying: his reasons do not put him into "contact with testimony that is reliable". On this sophisticated reductive account, a complete account of justification is specified by two conditions. Acceptance of testimony must be "rationally acceptable", which is just Lackey's 'audience condition' (p.181), and these reasons must connect up with reliable testimony, which is just Lackey's 'speaker condition'. These conditions then specify how it is that we can gain inductive knowledge from testimony: we can reasonably

and truly believe that testimony is a reliable sign. This sophisticated reductive theory, in my opinion, has thereby already been given a name: it is Lackey's dualism.

Learning from Words thus presents a sustained, and engaging, argument for a distinctive epistemological position. However, it is not the position Lackey advertises it to be. It is not a mix of reductive and non-reductive theory. It is a sophisticated reductive theory, which takes testimonial knowledge to be no more than inductive knowledge, and denies what is essential to any non-reductive account, which is that testimonial knowledge is the distinctive epistemological type transmitted knowledge. Since I think that the transmissive function is what testimony is all about, our views diverge – contrary to first appearances. However, this disagreement aside *Learning from Words* is admirably clear and densely argued. Epistemology needed a new look at testimony and *Learning from Words* gives it one.

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