

Learning from Words

Testimony as a Source of Knowledge

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A Critique of Reductionism and Non-Reductionism

5.1 Preliminary Remarks

In previous chapters, I argued that the proper focus in the epistemology of testimony should be on what speakers say, not on what they believe. In this chapter, I turn to the question: what, if anything, needs to be added to the SVT for a complete epistemology of testimony? Otherwise put, what precisely is needed in order for a speaker to successfully acquire justified or warranted belief, and ultimately knowledge, through either the spoken or written word of others? This question is at the center of the epistemology of testimony, and the current philosophical literature contains two main options for answering it: *reductionism* and *non-reductionism*. While reductionists argue that the epistemic status of testimony is ultimately reducible to sense perception, memory, and inductive inference, non-reductionists maintain that testimony is just as basic epistemically as these other sources. The aim of this chapter is to challenge the current terms of the debate by showing that there are serious problems afflicting both non-reductionism and reductionism.

Before proceeding, however, I should make a point of clarification. There will be two central questions at issue in this chapter: first, are positive reasons necessary for acquiring testimonially based knowledge and, second, are the epistemic properties of such knowledge—such as justification and warrant—ultimately reducible to the epistemic properties of purportedly more basic sources, such as sense perception, memory, and inductive inference? Reductionists answer affirmatively, while non-reductionists respond negatively, to both of these questions. For ease of discussion, I shall sometimes in this chapter focus specifically on testimonial justification and

warrant—for instance, since the truth, belief, and anti-Gettier components of testimonial knowledge are obviously not reducible to other sources in the way that the distinctively epistemic condition may be, it is far simpler to focus on testimonial justification or warrant when talking about reductionism. At other times, I shall focus on testimonial knowledge—for instance, since non-reductionists deny that the epistemic properties of testimony are reducible to other sources in the first place, their view can be discussed in terms of testimonial knowledge with considerable ease. These differences, however, should not cloud the fact that, ultimately, the central questions at issue concern the conditions for, and nature of, *testimonially based knowledge*.

5.2 Reductionism

Characterizing Reductionism

Reductionism, though not nearly as popular in the contemporary literature as its non-reductionist rival, has a rich history.¹ The most well-known proponent of this view is David Hume, and the following passages from his essay on miracles are often taken to be the most explicit and earliest characterization of reductionism in the epistemology of testimony:

There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. This species of reasoning, perhaps, one may deny to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. I shall not dispute about a word. It will be sufficient to observe, that our assurance in any argument of this kind 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. It being a general maxim, that no objects have any discoverable connexion together, and that

¹ Proponents of different versions of reductionism include Mackie (1970), Hume (1977), Fricker (1987, 1994, 1995, and 2006a), Adler (1994 and 2002), Lyons (1997), Lipton (1998), Shogenji (2006), and Van Cleve (2006). For nice discussions of Hume's version of reductionism, see Faulkner (1998) and Root (2001). Lehrer (2006) develops a view that is neither reductionist nor non-reductionist, but instead focuses on the trustworthiness that he claims is required on the part of both the speaker and the hearer in the acquisition of testimonial knowledge. Faulkner (2000) develops a hybrid reductionist/non-reductionist view of testimonial justification and knowledge. While Faulkner endorses a view that is in some ways similar to the dualist view I will defend in the next chapter, he espouses TEP-N*, which I rejected in Chapter 2.

all the inferences, which we can draw from one to another, are founded merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident, that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony, whose connexion with any event seems, in itself, as little necessary as any other. (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)

According to a Humean view, then, hearers must observe a constant and regular conjunction between the reports of speakers and the corresponding facts in order to accept testimony with justification or warrant. For instance, I may perceive a constant conformity between the instances of your testimony and reality and, on this basis, inductively conclude that you are a generally reliable epistemic source. If these inductively-based reasons are not themselves derived from further testimony, then my testimonial justification or warrant can be reduced to perceptual, memorial, and inferential justification or warrant.

Recent reductionists sometimes impose slightly laxer requirements than those found in Hume. For instance, Paul Faulkner writes:

Given that a speaker's intentions in communicating need not be informative and given the relevance of these intentions to the acquisition of testimonial knowledge ... [i]t is doxastically irresponsible to accept testimony without *some background belief in the testimony's credibility or truth*. In the case of perception and memory, rational acceptance requires only the absence of defeating background beliefs. In the case of testimony, rational acceptance requires the presence of supporting background beliefs.

This demand of responsibility may be expressed as a criterion of justification. *An audience is justified in forming a testimonial belief if and only if he is justified in accepting the speaker's testimony.* (Faulkner 2000: 587–8, first emphasis added)

In requiring that the hearer merely have *some* background information about the credibility or truth of the testimony in question—which perhaps can be satisfied without having specific information about the speaker herself—Faulkner's condition here may be read as being weaker than Hume's. Similarly, Elizabeth Fricker maintains:

In claiming that a hearer is required to assess a speaker for trustworthiness, I do not mean to insist, absurdly, that she is required to conduct an extensive piece

of M15-type “vetting” of any speaker before she may accept anything he says as true. ... My insistence is much weaker: that the hearer should be discriminating in her attitude to the speaker, in that she should be continually evaluating him for trustworthiness throughout their exchange, in the light of the evidence, or cues, available to her. This will be partly a matter of her being disposed to deploy background knowledge which is relevant, partly a matter of her monitoring the speaker for any tell-tale signs revealing likely untrustworthiness. (Fricker 1994: 149–50)

Once again, since Fricker requires that a hearer *deploy relevant background information* and *monitor* the speaker for trustworthiness, her version of reductionism may be read as being weaker than Hume’s, who is often understood as demanding that reliance on testimony occur “only when [the hearer] has checked for himself the credibility of the witnesses he trusts” (Coady 1992: 80).²

Yet, despite these differences, contemporary reductionists share with Hume a commitment to two theses central to reductionism. The first is what we may call the *Positive Reasons Thesis*: justification or warrant is conferred on testimonial beliefs by the presence of appropriate *positive reasons* on the part of hearers. Since these reasons cannot themselves be ultimately testimonially grounded—otherwise there would be circularity, i.e., testimonial beliefs ultimately justifying other testimonial beliefs—they must depend on resources provided by other epistemic sources, which typically include sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. This gives rise to the second thesis—what we may call the *Reduction Thesis*. Because the justification or warrant of testimonial beliefs is provided by non-testimonially grounded positive reasons, testimonial justification or warrant is said to *reduce* to the justification of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.³ As James Van Cleve says: “My view ... is that testimony gives us justified belief and reflective knowledge not because it shines by its own light, but because it has often enough been revealed true

² In this passage from Coady (1992), he is directly talking about J. L. Mackie’s view, but seems to attribute this same version of reductionism to Hume. It should be noted, however, that there is disagreement on how best to interpret Hume’s view of testimony. See, for instance, Traiger (1993), Faulkner (1998), and Root (2001).

³ As Fricker says, “Reductionists about testimony hold that, if testimony is to be vindicated as a source not merely of belief, but of knowledge, our epistemic right to believe what others tell us must be exhibitable as grounded in other epistemic resources and principles—perception, memory, and inference—which are regarded by them as both more fundamental, and less problematic” (Fricker 1995: 394).

by our other lights. On this point, I find myself uncharacteristically on the side of Hume rather than Reid” (Van Cleve 2006: 69).

Thus, let us formulate reductionism with respect to testimonial justification and warrant in the following way:

R: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B believes that p with justification/warrant on the basis of A’s testimony if and only if:

(R1) B believes that p on the basis of the content of A’s testimony, and

(R2) B has sufficiently good non-testimonial positive reasons to accept A’s testimony.

Now, though most reductionists do not explicitly include a condition like (R1) when presenting their view, I have done so to prevent some of the cases discussed in Chapter 2—such as your saying, in a soprano voice, that you have a soprano voice, and my coming to believe that you do entirely on the basis of hearing your soprano voice—from qualifying as *testimonially* justified or warranted. I have also formulated R in terms of “A’s testimony” rather than in terms of “A’s testimony that p ,” so as to allow some of the other cases discussed in Chapter 2—such as Virginia coming to believe that it is cold outside on the basis of my testimony that her hat and gloves are in the closet—to qualify as *testimonially* justified. Finally, notice that condition (R2) requires that the positive reasons be *non-testimonial*—this is to allow testimonial justification or warrant to reduce to perceptual, memorial, and inferential justification or warrant.

But, one might ask, what exactly is being reduced to what on the reductionist’s view? Otherwise put, what are the relata of testimonial reduction? Two different answers are given to this question. The first answer—a view often called *global reductionism*—is that the justification/warrant of testimony as a source of belief reduces to the justification/warrant of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. In particular, global reductionists maintain that in order to justifiedly accept a speaker’s report, a hearer must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for believing that testimony is generally reliable.⁴

⁴ More precisely, this is one version of global reductionism. The other version requires that “a hearer have evidence that *most of what she has ever learned through testimony is true*, where this evidence does not in any way rest on knowledge acquired by her through testimony” (Fricker 1994: 134). Though this weaker version of global reductionism avoids some of the objections raised to the stronger one, it faces

There are, however, at least three problems with global reductionism that render it ultimately an untenable view of testimonial justification or warrant. The first is that, before accepting any testimony at all, including that of their parents and teachers, very young children would have to wait until they had checked the accuracy of enough different kinds of reports from enough different speakers to conclude that testimony is generally reliable. Not only is it wildly implausible to suppose that most young children—or even adults—are capable of engaging in such a process, it also becomes mysterious how they would be able to acquire the conceptual and linguistic tools needed for an induction to the general reliability of testimony without accepting some testimony in the first place.⁵ Thus, if global reductionism is true, the very cognitive tools needed to acquire testimonial justification or warrant would be inaccessible to epistemic agents, thereby leading ultimately to skepticism about testimonial knowledge.

The second problem is that in order to have non-testimonially based positive reasons that testimony is generally reliable, one would have to be exposed not only to an appropriately random, wide-ranging sample of reports, but also to an appropriately random, wide-ranging sample of the corresponding facts. Both are problematic. With respect to the reports, most of us have been exposed only to a very limited range of reports from speakers in our native language in a handful of communities in our native country. This limited sample of reports provides only a fraction of what would be required to legitimately conclude that testimony is *generally* reliable. With respect to the corresponding facts, a similar problem arises: the observational base of ordinary epistemic agents is simply far too small to allow the requisite induction about the reliability of testimony. As C. A. J. Coady says:

it seems absurd to suggest that, individually, we have done anything like the amount of field-work that [reductionism] requires... many of us have never seen a baby born, nor have most of us examined the circulation of the blood nor the actual geography of the world nor any fair sample of the laws of the land, nor have we made the observations that lie behind our knowledge that the lights in the sky

problems of its own. Most notably, in the absence of a good reason to believe that *most of what one has ever learned through testimony* adequately and non-randomly represents either *testimony in general* or *testimony that one will encounter in the future*, it is unclear why this would justify the inference that future acceptances of testimony will be justified.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of some of the specific epistemic issues that arise regarding young children's acceptance of testimony, see Chapter 7.

are heavenly bodies immensely distant nor a vast number of other observations that [reductionism] would seem to require. (Coady 1992: 82)

Moreover, with many reports, such as those involving complex scientific, economic, or mathematical theories, most of us simply lack the conceptual machinery and background information needed to properly check the reports against the facts. Once again, then, global reductionism leads to skepticism about testimonial knowledge, at least for most epistemic agents.

The previous two points focused on our ability to *know* or *determine* whether testimony is a generally reliable epistemic source. A third problem with global reductionism—one that has not been properly appreciated but is, to my mind, the most debilitating objection—is that it is questionable whether there even is an epistemically significant *fact of the matter* here.⁶ To see this, consider, for instance, the following epistemically heterogeneous list of types of reports, all of which are subsumed under “testimony in general”: reports about the time of day, what one had for breakfast, the achievements of one’s children, whether one’s loved one looks attractive in a certain outfit, the character of one’s political opponents, one’s age and weight, one’s criminal record, and so on. Some of these types of reports may be generally highly reliable (e.g., about the time of day and what one had for breakfast), generally highly unreliable (e.g., about the achievements of one’s children, the looks of one’s loved ones, and the character of one’s political opponents), and generally very epistemically mixed, depending on the speaker (e.g., about one’s age, weight, and criminal record). Because of this epistemic heterogeneity, it is doubtful, not only whether “testimony” picks out an epistemically interesting or unified kind, but also whether it even makes sense to talk about testimony being a generally reliable source.

Otherwise put, even if it turned out that the majority of testimonial reports are, as a matter of fact, both true and properly formed, this information would not have much epistemic significance. For concealed in this percentage are all sorts of epistemically salient facts: some people

⁶ A notable exception is Fricker (1994). As she says, “looking for generalisations about the reliability or otherwise of testimony... as a homogenous whole, will not be an enlightening project. Illuminating generalisations, if there are any, will be about particular types of testimony, differentiated according to subject matter, or type of speaker, or both... [W]hen it comes to the probability of accuracy of speakers’ assertions, and what sorts of factors warrant a hearer in trusting a speaker, *testimony is not a unitary category*” (Fricker 1994: 139, emphasis added).

offer mostly false reports, some kinds of reports are mostly false, many true reports are about very mundane facts, and so on. Because of this, the mere fact that testimony is *generally* reliable—if indeed it is—would have very little epistemic bearing on any *particular* instance of testimony. For instance, suppose that I came to learn that 70 percent of all reports are both true and properly formed. What relevance would this information have to whether a particular instance of testimony is epistemically acceptable? Very little. For this information is so broad and conceals so many epistemically important differences that it would have virtually no straightforward epistemic application. Thus, even if global reductionism were entirely successful and it could be shown that testimony is generally reliable, this conclusion would have very little epistemic significance in itself.

The second version of reductionism—often called *local reductionism*—is that the justification/warrant of each particular report or instance of testimony reduces to the justification/warrant of instances of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. Specifically, local reductionists claim that in order to justifiably accept a speaker's testimony, a hearer must have non-testimonially based positive reasons for accepting the particular report in question. As Elizabeth Fricker says, "My reliance on a particular piece of testimony *reduces locally* just if I have adequate grounds to take my informant to be trustworthy on this occasion independently of accepting as true her very utterance" (Fricker 1995: 404).

There are, however, two importantly different ways of understanding the local reductionist's Positive Reasons Thesis. The first is:

PR-N: Appropriate positive reasons are *necessary* for testimonial justification/warrant.

The second, stronger, interpretation is:

PR-N&S: Appropriate positive reasons are *necessary and sufficient* for testimonial justification/warrant.

But notice: in order for testimonial justification or warrant to be *reducible* to sense perception, memory, and inductive inference, the positive reasons in question must be fully sufficient for justifying, or conferring warrant on, the relevant testimonial belief. Otherwise, there would be an asymmetry between the epistemic status of the *testimonial belief being reduced* and the

positive reasons doing the reducing, thereby preventing the possibility of just such a reduction. Because of this, *the Reduction Thesis of the local reductionist's view depends on reading the Positive Reasons Thesis as the stronger PR-N&S*. In what follows, however, I shall argue that PR-N&S is false.⁷

Rejecting Reductionism

To begin, consider the following:

NESTED SPEAKER: Fred has known Helen for five years and, during this time, he has acquired excellent epistemic reasons for believing her to be a highly reliable source of information on a wide range of topics. For instance, each time she has made a personal or professional recommendation to Fred, her assessment has proven to be accurate; each time she has reported an incident to Fred, her version of the story has been independently confirmed; each time she has recounted historical information, all of the major historical texts and figures have fully supported her account, and so on. Yesterday, Helen told Fred that Pauline, a close friend of hers, is a highly trustworthy person, especially when it comes to information regarding wild birds. Because of this, Fred unhesitatingly believed Pauline earlier today when she told him that albatrosses, not condors (as is widely believed), have the largest wingspan among wild birds. It turns out that while Helen is an epistemically excellent source of information, she was incorrect on this particular occasion: Pauline is, in fact, a highly incompetent and insincere speaker, especially on the topic of wild birds. Moreover, though Pauline is correct in her report about albatrosses, she came to hold this belief merely on the basis of wishful thinking (in order to make her reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* more compelling).⁸

Now, does Fred believe with justification or warrant that albatrosses have the largest wingspan among wild birds on the basis of Pauline's report? Intuitively, no. For, even though Helen's testimony provides Fred with excellent positive reasons for accepting the report in question, Pauline is not only a generally unreliable speaker, but she is also reporting a belief which, though true, fails to be reliably produced or appropriately truth-conducive.

⁷ Strictly speaking, I shall argue that the weakest version of only the *Reduction Thesis* of reductionism is false, leaving the general Positive Reasons Thesis of reductionism untouched. (Indeed, I shall argue later in this chapter that PR-N is correct.) However, since I am taking the Reduction Thesis to be an essential part of reductionism (what, after all, is reductionism with no reduction?), a view that merely includes the Positive Reasons Thesis does not qualify as reductionist.

⁸ A point of clarification: I refer to this case as NESTED SPEAKER because the justification/warrant for accepting one speaker's report is *nested within* the positive reasons for accepting another speaker's report. More precisely, the justification/warrant for accepting Pauline's testimony is nested within the positive reasons for accepting Helen's testimony.

Because of this, the testimony that Pauline offers to Fred also fails to be reliably produced or appropriately truth-conducive, thereby preventing it from leading to justified or warranted belief for Fred.⁹

What NESTED SPEAKER reveals is that the possession of good positive reasons by a hearer is not sufficient for accepting a speaker's testimony with justification or warrant. Why? Because the possession of positive reasons on behalf of a speaker's report, even objectively excellent ones, *does not necessarily put one in contact with testimony that is reliable*. There is, then, a further necessary condition for testimonial justification or warrant, one that requires that a speaker's testimony be reliable or otherwise truth-conducive. This additional "speaker-condition" can be fleshed out in different ways. For instance, as we saw in Chapter 2, many would require that a speaker herself *competently believe* the proposition to which she is *sincerely testifying* in order for it to qualify as justified or warranted belief for her hearers.¹⁰ Of course, I argued in this same chapter that neither competence nor sincerity is necessary for testimonial justification or warrant, and instead defended the view that the speaker's *statement* needs to be reliable or otherwise truth-conducive. But the point that is of import here is that it is a condition that cannot be subsumed merely by requiring the possession of appropriate positive reasons on the part of the hearer. The presence of such reasons is, therefore, not sufficient for testimonial justification or warrant. Accordingly, the stronger reading of the Positive Reasons Thesis—i.e., PR-N&S—is false.¹¹

⁹ This is not to say that a belief that fails to be reliably produced or appropriately connected with the truth will *necessarily* render a report based on such a belief unreliable. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 2, the epistemic status of beliefs and reports can come apart so that an unreliable believer can nonetheless be a reliable testifier. Rather, the problem with Pauline's testimony in NESTED SPEAKER is that her unreliability as a believer leads her to also be an *unreliable testifier*.

¹⁰ For discussions specifically about the role of competence and sincerity in testimony, see, for instance, Welbourne (1979, 1981, 1986, and 1994), Hardwig (1985 and 1991), Ross (1986), Fricker (1987, 1994, 1995, 2006a, and 2006b), Plantinga (1993b), McDowell (1994), Audi (1997, 1998, and 2006), Owens (2000 and 2006), Root (2001), Adler (2002 and 2006), Moran (2005), Faulkner (2006), and Sosa (2006).

¹¹ A proponent of reductionism may object to the conclusion of NESTED SPEAKER by arguing that justification—unlike, for instance, warrant and knowledge—is primarily an *internalist* notion. For instance, if I were a brain-in-a-vat and had no idea that I was, one might argue that I would still be *justified* in believing that I am here typing at this computer, even if I do not *know* that I am. Similarly, one might claim that in NESTED SPEAKER, the belief that Fred forms on the basis of Pauline's radically unreliable testimony is *justified*, even if it does not qualify as *knowledge*. (I am grateful to Peter Graham for pressing this point.)

By way of response to this objection, recall my emphasis in the Introduction that I am not only using "justification" and "warrant" interchangeably, but also that I am understanding these concepts as

This, in turn, means that the Reduction Thesis of reductionism is false. For, if the Reduction Thesis were correct, there wouldn't be any difference between the epistemic status of the *testimonial belief being reduced* and the *positive reasons doing the reducing*. That is, to the extent that the positive reasons were justified or warranted, so, too, should the testimony in question be justified or warranted. This is just what it would mean for testimonial justification/warrant to be *reduced* to the justification/warrant of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference. But notice: in NESTED SPEAKER, we have an example in which there is precisely such an epistemic difference. In particular, Fred's positive reasons are fully epistemically justified/warranted and yet the testimonially based belief in question is not.

There are, however, at least three central objections that a reductionist may raise to this conclusion. First, it may be argued that the conclusion drawn from NESTED SPEAKER follows only if an externalist view of epistemic justification or warrant is assumed. In particular, it may be claimed that, if reliability is not a necessary condition of justification or warrant, then the unreliability of Pauline's testimony does not prevent Fred's testimonial beliefs from being justified or warranted. And since internalists do in fact deny the necessity of reliability for justification or warrant, NESTED SPEAKER succeeds as a counterexample to reductionism only if a substantive assumption is made, one that reductionists are likely to reject from the start.

Notice, however, that any plausible view of epistemic justification or warrant must preserve the connection between a belief's being justified or warranted and its being likely that such a belief is true. For instance, Laurence Bonjour claims, "any degree of epistemic justification, however small, must increase to a commensurate degree the chances that the belief in question is true ... for otherwise it cannot qualify as epistemic justification at all" (Bonjour 1985: 8). Similarly, Scott Hendricks maintains that "[a] theory of justification must preserve the connection between a belief's

bearing a necessary connection with knowledge. Moreover, it is not at all uncommon in the literature to find justification being discussed, either entirely or partially, in externalist terms. To name just a few, see Alston (1989), Goldman (1992), and Bonjour and Sosa (2003). Still further, many reductionists are equally reductionistic about warrant and knowledge (though, of course, a truth-condition is added when testimonial knowledge is at issue). Hence, for those who hold that justification is a purely internalist notion, my arguments in this section can simply be recast as arguments against reductionism about testimonial *warrant* or *knowledge*.

being justified and a belief's being likely to be true" (Hendricks 2005: 405). Now, internalists will attempt to secure the connection between epistemic justification (warrant) and truth one way—say, through the presence of certain kinds of mental states—while externalists will attempt to do so another way—say, through truth-tracking. But both internalists and externalists are committed to justification or warrant *having* an appropriate connection with the truth. This connection, however, is precisely what is missing in NESTED SPEAKER. For while Helen's testimony makes probable that Pauline's testimony is likely to be true, Pauline's testimony that albatrosses have the largest wingspan does not make probable the truth of this proposition. The fact that Pauline's testimony does not make probable the proposition about albatrosses is thus enough to render Fred's belief unjustified, regardless of whether internalism or externalism is assumed.

Second, it may be argued that NESTED SPEAKER simply describes a testimonial Gettier-type case, one in which a hearer's belief is justified or warranted but true merely by accident. In particular, one may claim that, because of the excellent reasons he has for trusting Pauline, the true belief that Fred acquires from her testimony is *justified or warranted*. Our intuition that something is epistemically defective in such a case can be explained by the fact that Fred's belief nevertheless falls short of *knowledge*.

By way of response to this objection, it will be helpful to compare NESTED SPEAKER with the following:

UNNESTED SPEAKER: Max has known Ethel for ten years and, over the course of these years, he has acquired excellent epistemic reasons for believing her to be a highly reliable source of information on a wide range of topics. Indeed, during this time, she has never offered, to Max or anyone else, a report that has been either insincere or improperly formed. Currently, however, Ethel is in the midst of a personal crisis, which she effectively conceals from those around her, and her emotional state of mind leads her to report to Max that her purse has been stolen, despite having absolutely no evidence for thinking this to be the case. Max, detecting nothing amiss, readily accepts Ethel's testimony. Now, it turns out that Ethel's purse was in fact stolen: while she was at a coffee shop earlier today, a young man slipped it off her chair and into his backpack.

Notice first that in UNNESTED SPEAKER, Max not only has excellent epistemic reasons for accepting Ethel's testimony, but *Ethel is also a generally*

reliable testifier. The problem is simply that, on this particular occasion, Ethel acts completely out of epistemic character and offers a report for which she lacks adequate evidence. What's more, she gets veridically (though not financially!) lucky: her report turns out to be true. Because of this, one may plausibly regard UNNESTED SPEAKER as a Gettier-type case, i.e., a case of justified or warranted true belief that falls short of knowledge. In particular, one may argue that Max's excellent positive reasons for Ethel's testimony combined with her general reliability as a testifier render his true belief about the stolen purse justified or warranted, though not an instance of knowledge.¹² Accordingly, UNNESTED SPEAKER would fail to show that there can be a difference between the epistemic status of the testimonial belief being reduced and the positive reasons doing the reducing.

In NESTED SPEAKER, however, while Fred has excellent positive reasons to accept Pauline's testimony, *she is not a reliable testifier in any sense of the word*. For not only does Pauline hold her belief about the wingspan of albatrosses on the basis of wishful thinking, but she is also in general a highly incompetent and insincere testifier. In other words, with respect to most topics most of the time, Pauline believes to be true what is in fact false, reports what she herself does not believe, or both. Thus, positive reasons can come apart from even *general* reliability. Moreover, given the degree and depth of Pauline's unreliability, there is simply no plausible sense in which the belief that Fred forms on the basis of her testimony could be justified or warranted. Unlike UNNESTED SPEAKER, then, NESTED SPEAKER simply cannot be plausibly regarded as a Gettier-type case.¹³

One may pursue a third line of resistance to NESTED SPEAKER, however, by arguing that Fred's "excellent epistemic reasons" on behalf of Pauline's testimony are not "appropriate" in the relevant sense. For, one may say that the only positive reasons that are appropriate are ones that render it likely in an objective sense that the testimony in question is true. Since Helen is incorrect in her assessment of Pauline, it may be

¹² Let me emphasize that this is how *one* might plausibly construe the case; it is not, however, how *I* would characterize it. Despite the fact that Ethel is a generally reliable testifier, I would hold that Max's belief on the basis of her testimony fails to be justified or warranted because the report itself is not reliably produced. On my view, the virtue of NESTED SPEAKER, in comparison with UNNESTED SPEAKER, is that it entirely precludes this sort of plausible reading.

¹³ I am grateful for an exchange with Sandy Goldberg that prompted the addition of both UNNESTED SPEAKER and the discussion contrasting it with NESTED SPEAKER.

thought that such an assessment fails to provide Fred with positive reasons that satisfy this criterion.

But, as NESTED SPEAKER is described, Fred *does* have reasons that, by one measure, render it objectively likely that Pauline's testimony is true. In particular, Fred's positive reasons place those beliefs from Pauline's testimony in a category that contains beliefs that are or would be mostly true; namely, *those beliefs that are supported by Helen's testimony*. For instance, were Fred to decide between accepting the reports of two different speakers, one of whom has the support of Helen's testimony and another who lacks this support, most of the time Fred would do well to accept the reports of the former. That is, most of the time, forming beliefs from sources supported by Helen's testimony would lead to the truth. In this sense, then, the positive reasons that Fred possesses for Pauline's testimony *do* render it likely in an objective sense that her testimony is true. The problem is that, by other measures of objective likelihood, Fred's positive reasons *do not* render it likely that Pauline's testimony is true. Fred's belief about the wingspan of albatrosses also belongs to a category that contains beliefs that are or would be mostly false; namely, *those beliefs that are supported by Pauline's testimony*. Moreover, because Pauline is the direct source of the belief, it is clear that her unreliability is not offset by the excellence of Fred's reasons for believing her. So, although Fred does have excellent positive reasons for believing Pauline's testimony, the belief in question is not justified or warranted.¹⁴

It is, therefore, not enough for testimonial justification or warrant that a hearer have even epistemically excellent positive reasons for accepting a speaker's testimony—the speaker must also do her part in the testimonial exchange by offering testimony that is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive. Thus, PR-N&S is false and, accordingly, reductionism in the epistemology of testimony is false.

¹⁴ A further reductionist strategy for resisting the conclusion of NESTED SPEAKER is to make it part of the definition of "appropriate" that the reasons in question lead hearers to reports that bear a reliable connection with the truth. This would make it impossible for a subject to have appropriate positive reasons for believing a report that wasn't reliably connected with the truth. This strategy, however, has at least one of two unattractive consequences. It either (i) makes the requirement for positive reasons so externalistic that it undermines the central motivation for endorsing the Positive Reasons Thesis in the first place; namely, to preserve a link between epistemic justification/warrant and subjective rationality. Or (ii), it makes the requirements for testimonial justification/warrant so stringent that there would be far less testimonial justification/warrant than is intuitively acceptable.

5.3 Non-Reductionism

Characterizing Non-Reductionism

Given the problems facing reductionism, let us now turn to non-reductionism to see if this view of testimony fares any better. Non-reductionism is the most widely accepted view of testimonial knowledge (justification/warrant) in the current literature.¹⁵ Such a view is standardly traced back to the work of Thomas Reid and the following passage is frequently cited, not only in its support, but also as arguably the earliest explicit endorsement of non-reductionism:

The wise author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon human testimony before we can give a reason for doing so. This, indeed, puts our judgments almost entirely in the power of those who are about us in the first period of life; but this is necessary both to our preservation and to our improvement. If children were so framed as to pay no regard to testimony or authority, they must, in the literal sense, perish for lack of knowledge.

I believed by instinct whatever they [my parents and tutors] told me, long before I had the idea of a lie, or a thought of the possibility of their deceiving me. Afterwards, upon reflection, I found they had acted like fair and honest people, who wished me well. I found that, if I had not believed what they told me, before I could give a reason for my belief, I had to this day been little better than a changeling. And although this natural credulity hath sometimes occasioned my being imposed upon by deceivers, yet it hath been of infinite advantage to me upon the whole; therefore, I consider it as another good gift of Nature. (Reid 1983: 281–2)

According to Reid, then, accepting the testimony of others couldn't require having non-testimonially grounded positive reasons—as reductionists require—since we must all rely on the reports of our parents and

¹⁵ Proponents of various versions of non-reductionism include Austin (1979), Welbourne (1979, 1981, 1986, and 1994), Evans (1982), Reid (1983), Ross (1986), Hardwig (1985 and 1991), Coady (1992 and 1994), Burge (1993 and 1997), Plantinga (1993*b*), Webb (1993), Dummett (1994), Foley (1994), McDowell (1994), Strawson (1994), Williamson (1996 and 2000), Goldman (1999), Schmitt (1999), Insole (2000), Owens (2000 and 2006), Rysiew (2002), Weiner (2003), Sosa (2006), Goldberg (2006), and Goldberg and Henderson (2006). Some phrase their view in terms of knowledge, others in terms of justification or entitlement, still others in terms of warrant. Audi (1997, 1998, and 2006) embraces a non-reductionist view of testimonial knowledge, but not of testimonial justification. Stevenson (1993), Millgram (1997), and Graham (2006) defend restricted versions of non-reductionism. As mentioned earlier, I shall, for ease of exposition, focus almost entirely on non-reductionism with respect to knowledge in this chapter. However, much of what is said applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to non-reductionism with respect to justification and warrant.

caretakers long before we possess any evidence regarding their reliability or trustworthiness.¹⁶ Thus, testimony is an irreducible source of knowledge (justification/warrant), on an epistemic par with sources that are often taken to be more basic, such as sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.

More recent endorsements of non-reductionism add to Reid's characterization that, though the presence of positive reasons is not necessary to acquire testimonially based knowledge, the absence of negative reasons is. This requirement, though considerably weaker than either version of the reductionist's Positive Reasons Thesis, is included to prevent the compatibility of testimonial knowledge and doxastic irrationality or irresponsibility. So, for instance, John McDowell maintains that "knowledge is available to be picked up... by someone whose taking the speaker's word for it is *not doxastically irresponsible*... it is obviously doxastically irresponsible to believe someone about whom one *has positive reason to believe he is not trustworthy, or not likely to be informed about the subject matter of the conversation*" (McDowell 1994: 210–11, emphasis added). Similarly, Tyler Burge writes that "[a] person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, *unless there are stronger reasons not to do so*" (Burge 1993: 467, emphasis added). Following this view, Matthew Weiner accepts the principle: "We are justified in accepting anything that we are told unless there is positive evidence against doing so" (Weiner 2003: 257). And Robert Audi claims that "gaining testimonially grounded knowledge normally requires *only having no reason for doubt about the credibility of the attester*" (Audi 1998: 142, emphasis added). The underlying thought here is that so long as there is no available evidence *against* accepting a speaker's report, the hearer has no positive epistemic work to do in order to accept the testimony in question.¹⁷ Otherwise put, non-reductionists maintain that, so as long as there are no relevant undefeated defeaters,

¹⁶ I discuss this particular point in much more detail in Chapter 7.

¹⁷ This is a broad characterization, with subtler or more robust versions of non-reductionism not always clearly subsumed by it. For instance, Goldberg (2006) requires also that the hearer have "the epistemic right to rely on" the testimony of the speaker in question (2006: 128); Goldberg and Henderson (2006) require that the hearer "monitor" the speaker for signs of incompetence and insincerity; and Graham (2006) claims that the justification provided by the "event or state of comprehending the attester's presentation-as-true that P... may fall short of on balance justification (even if undefeated)" (2006: 94). In my direct arguments against non-reductionism later in this chapter, however, even these subtler versions, particularly Goldberg (2006) and Goldberg and Henderson (2006), will be subsumed.

hearers can acquire testimonially based knowledge *merely* on the basis of a speaker's testimony.

There are two different kinds of undefeated defeaters that are typically taken by non-reductionists to be relevant here—what we called in Chapter 2 *psychological defeaters* and *normative defeaters*. Psychological defeaters, it may be recalled, are doubts or beliefs that are had by S, yet indicate that S's belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained, while normative defeaters are doubts or beliefs that S ought to have, yet indicate that S's belief that *p* is either false or unreliably formed or sustained. According to non-reductionism, then, acquiring testimonially based knowledge is an extremely simple epistemic process that functions well between speakers and hearers unless it is interrupted by the presence of an undefeated defeater.

In this section, my purpose shall be, first, to provide a precise and plausible formulation of non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony. In so doing, I shall show that non-reductionism, as it is currently characterized in the literature, is a wholly inadequate view of testimonial knowledge. Specifically, I shall argue that, in addition to the absence of undefeated defeaters, there are at least three further conditions that need to be added to this view to render it plausible. Thus, I intend to show that acquiring knowledge through the word of others is a process that is far more complicated and easily interrupted than proponents of non-reductionism maintain. I shall then argue that, even with such a precise and plausible formulation of their view, non-reductionists face a serious problem. I shall conclude, then, that neither reductionism nor non-reductionism provides an adequate theory of the epistemic status of our testimonial beliefs.

A Necessary Condition on the Testimony

An initial formulation of non-reductionism with respect to testimonial knowledge can be expressed in the following way:¹⁸

¹⁸ Since my ultimate goal is to characterize the minimal requirements needed to render any version of non-reductionism with respect to testimonial knowledge plausible, I shall speak simply of "non-reductionism," where this is not meant to refer to any particular non-reductionist's position. It should also be clear that, in what follows, NR is the *weakest* formulation of the non-reductionist's position, which I begin with for dialectical purposes. As I shall soon show, many non-reductionists replace condition (NR₃) with a stronger one, such as TEP-N from Chapter 2.

NR: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that p on the basis of A's testimony if and only if:

- (NR₁) B believes that p on the basis of the content of A's testimony,
- (NR₂) B has no undefeated (psychological or normative) defeaters for A's testimony, and
- (NR₃) it is true that p .

Now, as was the case with our formulation of R in the previous section, I have not only included condition (NR₁), despite the fact that most non-reductionists do not explicitly include a condition like this when presenting their view, I have also formulated NR in terms of "A's testimony" rather than in terms of "A's testimony that p ." Both of these additions are based on the relevant considerations from Chapter 2, but can easily be substituted with their stronger counterparts. Condition (NR₂) replaces the reductionist's requirement for positive reasons with a weaker one requiring merely the absence of undefeated defeaters, and condition (NR₃) is included simply to distinguish testimonially based knowledge from testimonially justified or warranted belief. Thus, according to NR, *any true report from any kind of speaker* can lead to testimonial knowledge for *any sort of hearer*; the only epistemic obstacle to such a process is the presence of an undefeated defeater.

But now consider the following sort of case:

INCOMPETENT AGENT: Margaret is an extremely incompetent epistemic agent, continually forming perceptual beliefs without wearing her required prescription eyeglasses, testimonial beliefs on the basis of reading *The National Enquirer*, introspective beliefs when she is intoxicated, and so on. One day, Margaret again fails to wear her corrective lenses and forms the belief that there is a great horned owl in a tree 50 feet away. Her belief happens to be true. Later that day, Margaret meets someone on the street named Eleanor, reports her owl sighting to her, and Eleanor comes to believe that there was a great horned owl in a neighborhood tree on the basis of Margaret's testimony. Moreover, since it is possible for great horned owls to be in this neighborhood and Eleanor knows nothing about Margaret's epistemic habits, there are no undefeated defeaters for the report in question, that is, Eleanor neither believes nor has evidence available to her such that she should believe that Margaret's report is false or unreliable.

Does Eleanor know that there was a great horned owl in a neighborhood tree? Intuitively, no, despite the satisfaction of conditions (NR₁)–(NR₃). For even though Eleanor’s *response* to the proffered testimony is not epistemically defective, Margaret’s *testimony* is. In particular, Margaret’s report of her perceptual belief, though true, fails to be reliably produced or appropriately connected with the truth, thereby preventing it from leading to knowledge for her hearers. What this type of case shows, therefore, is that there is a further condition necessary for testimonial knowledge, one that requires that *the proffered testimony be reliable, truth-conducive, or otherwise epistemically acceptable*.

Now, as we saw in Chapter 2, many non-reductionists have recognized the need to strengthen condition (NR₃) and have, therefore, replaced it with TEP-N. So, for instance, Michael Welbourne maintains that “[a]ll that is required of a listener who understands a knowledgeable teller if the knowledge is to be successfully transmitted to him is that he *believe* the teller” (Welbourne 1986: 5–6, original emphasis). Welbourne is, therefore, requiring TEP-N here since the speaker in question must be “knowledgeable,” that is, she must have the knowledge in question herself in order to pass it to a hearer. But even though substituting (NR₃) with TEP-N adequately addresses the problem found in INCOMPETENT AGENT—Eleanor does not know that there was a great horned owl in a neighborhood tree because Margaret does not speak from knowledge—we also saw in Chapter 2 that such a condition is in fact too strong a requirement for testimonial knowledge. So, let us reformulate the non-reductionist’s view of testimonial knowledge, not by replacing (NR₃) with TEP-N, but by adding RS-N to NR*, which was defended in Chapter 3:

NR*: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that *p* on the basis of A’s testimony if and only if:

(NR₁) B believes that *p* on the basis of the content of A’s testimony,

(NR₂) B has no undefeated (psychological or normative) defeaters for A’s testimony,

(NR₃) it is true that *p*, and

(NR₄) A’s testimony is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive.

Hence, in addition to the presence of undefeated defeaters, there is a further epistemic obstacle to the acquisition of testimonial knowledge—namely,

the unreliability of the testimony in question. Accordingly, only true reports made by *reliable testifiers* can become testimonial knowledge for hearers.¹⁹

A Necessary Condition on the Hearer

Even the revised NR* is not an adequate account of testimonial knowledge, however, because there is a second problem for non-reductionism. Consider, for instance, the following case, which bears many similarities to COMPULSIVELY TRUSTING from Chapter 2:

COMPULSIVELY GOOD-NATURED: Stuart is a compulsively good-natured epistemic agent. Not only does he always think highly of other people, he is incapable of thinking poorly of them even when the circumstances clearly call for doing so. That is, even when Stuart has good evidence available to him for thinking, e.g., that someone is lying to him, deceiving him, betraying him, and so on, he can't come to believe this. One day, Gilbert, a friendly neighbor down the street, tells Stuart that he saw a cougar in a nearby hiking trail and Stuart, of course, readily accepts his testimony. Now, it turns out that Gilbert did in fact see a cougar in the aforementioned hiking trail, that he is very reliable with respect to both his epistemic and testimonial practices in this case, and that Stuart has no reason to doubt the proffered testimony. But, given Stuart's compulsively good nature, even if he had massive amounts of evidence available to him indicating, e.g., that Gilbert did not see a cougar, that he is an unreliable epistemic agent, that he is an unreliable testifier, that cougars do not live in this part of the country, and so on, he would have nonetheless accepted Gilbert's testimony.

Does Stuart know that there was a cougar in a nearby hiking trail on the basis of Gilbert's testimony? To my mind, the answer is no. For the only epistemic requirement placed on the hearer in NR* is condition (NR2). And although Stuart does, as a matter of fact, satisfy this condition by virtue of not having any undefeated defeaters for Gilbert's report, the way in which he satisfies it is inadequate for testimonial knowledge.

To see this, notice that because of Stuart's compulsively good nature, he simply *lacks the capacity* to be sensitive to the presence of defeaters. In this respect, Stuart is—as was true of Bill in COMPULSIVELY TRUSTING—no better epistemically than a subject who has been brainwashed

¹⁹ This problem resembles the one that NESTED SPEAKER poses to reductionism: namely, that the possession of good positive reasons by a hearer is not sufficient for accepting a speaker's testimony with justification or warrant since the possession of such reasons, even objectively excellent ones, does not necessarily put one in contact with testimony that is reliable.

or programmed to accept any report that is made by any speaker. For Stuart is such that he would have accepted Gilbert's testimony *under any circumstances*.²⁰ Because of this, the mere fact that Stuart does not have any undefeated defeaters for Gilbert's testimony is clearly not enough to satisfy condition (NR₂) of NR* in a way that has epistemic value. Clocks, telephone poles, and coffee cups also do not have any defeaters in this trivial way.²¹ In order for satisfaction of the no-defeater condition to properly reflect on the epistemic agent, the agent in question must have the *general capacity* to recognize and process counterevidence; otherwise put, the agent must *substantively* satisfy the no-defeater condition.

So, could the non-reductionist simply add a condition requiring the substantive satisfaction of (NR₂)? Although the addition of this requirement would successfully prevent epistemic agents like Stuart from acquiring testimonial knowledge, there is a deeper problem with NR*. Consider, for instance, the following case:

COMPULSIVELY PARANOID: While in her home community, Beatrice is a compulsively paranoid epistemic agent. Though she has a bit of evidence suggesting that a few of her neighbors have lied to her in the past, she has come to be utterly convinced that everyone in her neighborhood is constantly trying to deceive her, undermine her successes, and destroy her reputation. At the same time, however, she is equally certain that those around her know that she is suspicious of them. Because of this, Beatrice is confident that she is actually surrounded by very reliable testifiers. For given their intent to deceive her coupled with their suspicion that she knows about their intent, Beatrice concludes that everyone will in fact report what they believe under the assumption that she will believe the opposite. One day, Beatrice runs into her neighbor Beverly, whom she has no good epistemic reason to distrust, and Beverly tells her that there is a golden eagle's nest in a local tree. Upon receiving this report, Beatrice reasons thusly: "Beverly wants to deceive me but she also knows that I am suspicious of her. So, she has reported to me that there is a golden eagle's nest in a local tree, believing that I will disbelieve her. But I know her strategy and will thwart her plan to deceive me by

²⁰ Let me emphasize that the problem with Stuart is not that he is simply a *gullible* epistemic agent with respect to incoming testimony. For I take it that even very gullible people have the *general capacity* to appreciate counterevidence, even if they are very bad at doing so. Thus, very gullible people, though capable of substantively satisfying the no-defeater condition, simply fail to do so very often. By contrast, because Stuart is compulsively good-natured, he is psychologically incapable of appreciating counterevidence and thus he is epistemically defective in a much deeper way than the merely gullible. For that reason, Stuart cannot satisfy the no-defeater condition in anything but a trivial way.

²¹ I shall develop this point in much more detail in Chapter 7.

accepting her testimony. Therefore, I will believe that there is a golden eagle's nest in a local tree." Now, the report in question is in fact true, Beverly is a reliable testifier, and Beatrice does not believe, or have evidence available to her such that she should believe, that Beverly's report is either false or unreliable. Moreover, Beatrice is capable of being sensitive to defeaters and, when she is outside of her home community, she is even appropriately sensitive to them.

Does Beatrice know that there is a golden eagle's nest in a local tree on the basis of Beverly's testimony?²² Even though she substantively satisfied condition (NR₂), in addition to fulfilling conditions (NR₁), (NR₃), and (NR₄), the answer is clearly no. For while Stuart's problem *was the complete absence of the capacity to be sensitive to defeaters*, Beatrice's problem is that she is *inappropriately sensitive to defeaters*. Otherwise put, even though she has the general capacity to be sensitive to defeaters, her sensitivity mechanism is defective or malfunctioning in an important sense. And while this defect or malfunction is *truth-preserving* with respect to incoming testimony in Beatrice's home community, it is not *knowledge-preserving*.

Notice, first, that because of Beatrice's compulsively paranoid nature, she is overly sensitive to the presence of counterevidence. On the basis of scanty evidence that a few of her neighbors have lied to her in the past, she has come to believe that everyone in her neighborhood is intent on deceiving her. So, while Stuart is such that he can't believe that there is counterevidence present when there is, Beatrice is such that she believes that there is counterevidence present even when there is not. In both of these cases, however, there is a clear sense in which the hearer in question is an unreliable or improperly functioning recipient of testimony. For even though Beatrice, unlike Stuart, substantively satisfies condition

²² It should be emphasized that Beatrice's inference does not interfere with the belief in question being testimonial in origin. For it does not differ in any epistemically significant way from a rational inference. For instance, suppose Beatrice were to reason thusly: "Whenever Beverly has told me something in the past, it has turned out to be true. So, I have reason to believe that Beverly is a reliable testifier. I will, therefore, accept her testimony in this particular case." Now, it is plausible to suppose that this sort of rational inference is tacitly operative in much of the testimony that is accepted, and yet we rightly regard the resulting knowledge as testimonial in origin. Hence, similar considerations should apply with respect to Beatrice's acceptance of Beverly's testimony in COMPULSIVELY PARANOID.

However, if one is still troubled by the role of inference in the formation of Beatrice's belief, the case can simply be modified so that she does not engage in any particular inference about Beverly's current piece of testimony. Rather, Beatrice forms the belief in question by following a general strategy of accepting the testimony of her neighbors, where this strategy is underwritten by her inference that her neighbors are trying to deceive her but know that she is suspicious of them, thereby rendering them generally reliable testifiers.

(NR₂), she does so irrationally and fortuitously. In particular, she has two irrational beliefs which, when combined, quite luckily lead to the absence of relevant counterbeliefs and counterevidence. And even though this lucky coincidence preserves the truth of the belief in question, neither explicit irrationality nor luck of this sort is compatible with testimonial knowledge.

But, even more importantly, let us briefly consider the non-reductionist's rationale for including condition (NR₂) in the first place. If this weren't a necessary condition on such a view, hearers could acquire testimonial knowledge from any reliable speaker, no matter how irrational or epistemically irresponsible such acceptance was. It is precisely to avoid this radically counterintuitive picture that non-reductionists include the no-defeater condition. Testimonial knowledge is defeasible, through the presence of either an undefeated psychological or normative defeater. We can, therefore, accept much of what we are told on simple trust according to non-reductionism, but not where this acceptance is epistemically irrational or irresponsible. However, if this is the rationale for the inclusion of condition (NR₂), then it should be all the more clear that a subject like Beatrice does not acquire knowledge under the circumstances described above. For, as previously mentioned, it is clear that the process by which she comes to accept the testimony in question is highly irrational. Thus, by the non-reductionist's own admission that explicit irrationality is incompatible with knowledge, Beatrice turns out to not have the testimonial knowledge in question.

What the two cases above show, therefore, is that in order to acquire knowledge from the testimony of a speaker, *the hearer in question has to be a properly functioning or reliable recipient of testimony*, where having the capacity for and being appropriately sensitive to defeaters are at least two central components of this broader requirement.²³ Let us, then, reformulate the non-reductionists's view in the following way:

NR^{**}: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that *p* on the basis of A's testimony if and only if:

(NR₁) B believes that *p* on the basis of the content of A's testimony,

²³ For further discussion of "proper function" and "reliability," see Plantinga (1993*b*) and Goldman (1986), respectively.

- (NR₂) B has no undefeated (psychological or normative) defeaters for A's testimony,
- (NR₃) it is true that *p*,
- (NR₄) A's testimony is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, and
- (NR₅) B is a reliable or properly functioning recipient of testimony.²⁴

So, in addition to both the reliability of the testifier in question and the absence of undefeated defeaters, there is a further condition needed to render non-reductionism acceptable. Even those proponents of non-reductionism who saw the need for a condition on the speaker's testimony, however, have missed this crucial aspect of testimonial knowledge. But the need for it should be clear: even if speakers are perfectly reliable testifiers, hearers need to be reliable recipients of their testimony. And, despite the fact that most non-reductionists think the inclusion of (NR₂) sufficiently ensures this, we have seen that such a condition can be satisfied trivially, irrationally, and luckily, none of which is adequate for testimonial knowledge.

A Necessary Condition on the Environment

Even the twice revised NR** is not an adequate account of testimonial knowledge, however, because there is a third problem for non-reductionism. Consider, for example, the following case:

INSULAR COMMUNITY: Marvin is an epistemically impeccable recipient of testimony. Not only does he have the capacity for being sensitive to defeaters, but he is also appropriately and reliably sensitive to them when accepting the reports of others. One evening, while on a road trip, Marvin stops in a small town to find a hotel for the night and he encounters a large group of people

²⁴ In a complete account of testimonial knowledge, more will need to be said about the level of generality appropriate for this condition. It may, for instance, be too weak epistemically to require merely that the hearer be a properly functioning or reliable recipient of testimony with respect to the acceptance of *A's testimony that p*. For, what if this is the *only* statement for which a hearer would satisfy condition (NR₅)? Some may here doubt whether this is enough to enable the acquisition of testimonial knowledge. On the other hand, it may be too strong epistemically to require that the hearer be an *overall* properly functioning or reliable recipient of testimony. A hearer may, for instance, be inappropriately sensitive to defeaters about her political beliefs. But surely, one might claim, this should not prevent her from satisfying condition (NR₅) when acquiring scientific beliefs, for which she is impeccably sensitive to defeaters.

gathered for an annual neighborhood parade. Out of this large crowd, Marvin quite fortuitously focuses on Alfred, the only member of this epistemic community who reliably shares information with “outsiders,” and asks him where they are. Alfred tells Marvin that they are in Smithville. Now, it is true that they are in Smithville, Alfred is a reliable testifier with respect to this information, and Marvin, not knowing that the testimonial habits of the members of this community are extremely unreliable when “outsiders” are involved, readily accepts the proffered testimony. Moreover, because he has no reason for thinking that Smithville differs from his own community in any epistemically relevant way, Marvin does not believe, or have evidence available to him such that he should believe, that Alfred’s report is either false or unreliable.

Does Marvin know that he is in Smithville on the basis of Alfred’s testimony? To my mind, the answer to this question is clearly negative, despite the satisfaction of conditions (NR₁)–(NR₅) of NR**.²⁵ For, even though both the speaker and the hearer in our envisaged case are reliable participants in the testimonial exchange in question, the epistemic circumstances are not suitable to the reception of reliable testimony.²⁶

To see this, notice that the fact that Marvin acquires a justified or warranted true belief about his whereabouts is, in large part, due to good fortune. For not only is Alfred surrounded by a crowd of testifiers who are extremely unreliable sources of information for “outsiders,” but Marvin is also completely unaware of the epistemic habits of both the inhabitants of Smithville in general and of Alfred in particular. Because of this, that he approaches Alfred rather than any of the other members of Smithville, encounters a reliable testifier rather than an unreliable one, and acquires a true belief rather than a false one, are all strokes of good luck.

Now, the precise nature of the problem with this sort of luck can be diagnosed in two different ways. First, one may argue that the problem with Marvin’s belief is that it is merely an *accident that it is true rather than false* and

²⁵ I should note that it is not open to the non-reductionist to argue that the fact that Marvin is unaware of the epistemic habits of this new community provides him with an undefeated defeater for accepting the testimony in question (and, accordingly, that he fails condition (NR₂) of NR**). For to require that Marvin have some basis for thinking that the inhabitants of Smithville are reliable testifiers is to require that he have *positive reasons* for accepting Alfred’s report with justification or warrant, a requirement that non-reductionists explicitly reject. And, since Marvin has no reason to believe that Smithville differs epistemically from his own community, there is no other sense in which he could be said to have a defeater for Alfred’s testimony.

²⁶ Since Plantinga (1993b) includes a condition on the environment in his general account of warrant, his view of testimonial knowledge will most likely avoid this sort of problem.

is thereby a Gettier-type case.²⁷ For instance, consider one of the famous examples illustrating this sort of accidentality: Albert is driving down the street, sees a barn in a field, and forms the true belief that there is a barn in the field on the basis of this perceptual experience. However, unbeknownst to Albert, the barn that he saw is the only real one, completely surrounded by barn façades.²⁸ In this way, just as Albert's belief that there is a barn in the field could equally have been false, so too Marvin's belief about his whereabouts could equally have been false. Hence, in both cases, the belief in question is true, but only by accident. Second, one may claim that the problem with Marvin's belief is that it is merely an *accident that it is justified rather than unjustified*.²⁹ Specifically, it may be argued that INSULAR COMMUNITY differs from standard Gettier-type cases by virtue of the accidentality being located at the justificatory level rather than at the level of truth. For, one may contend, the fact that Marvin acquired the true belief that he is in Smithville is not, in one sense, an accident: Alfred is a perfectly reliable testifier, both in general and with respect to this information. Instead, that Marvin used a reliable source of information rather than an unreliable one and, accordingly, acquired a justified belief rather than an unjustified one is where the accidentality comes in.

It is not necessary that we here choose between these competing diagnoses. For the general problem that INSULAR COMMUNITY points to is that *the environment in question needs to be suitable for receiving reliable testimony*.³⁰ Because the epistemic community that Marvin

²⁷ See Gettier (1963) for the initial formulation of the problem and Shope (1983) for some of the many permutations of Gettier cases.

²⁸ This case is originally due to Carl Ginet, but first appeared in print in Goldman (1976).

²⁹ See Reed (2000) for the distinction between accidental truth and accidental justification.

³⁰ It has been suggested to me by Frederick Schmitt that the problem of INSULAR COMMUNITY might be better resolved by including a "metareliability" condition. (See, for instance, Schmitt (1987 and 1999).) In particular, rather than locating the problem with Marvin's testimonial belief in his epistemic environment, the deeper problem, it is argued, is that Marvin is unable to distinguish reliable sources of testimony from unreliable ones. In this way, if we include a metareliability constraint that requires that the recipient of testimony select a reliable source via the capacity to distinguish the reliable sources from the unreliable, then the problem of INSULAR COMMUNITY would be avoided. I suspect, however, that even if such a metareliability constraint would adequately address the problem of INSULAR COMMUNITY, most non-reductionists would regard such a condition as being far too strong. For, in most cases, the natural way in which a recipient of testimony could satisfy such a metareliability constraint would be via the acquisition of positive reasons on behalf of those sources that are reliable. And since the requirement for positive reasons is precisely what divides non-reductionism from reductionism, a condition of this sort threatens one of the central tenets of non-reductionism: namely, that testimonial knowledge can be acquired in the complete absence of any reason to believe

encounters is filled with massively unreliable testifiers, the only way that Marvin could acquire true beliefs that are justified or warranted in this environment (without access to further information) is through good fortune. Moreover, this sort of problem can arise in a multitude of ways: one may fortuitously pick up the only reliable book or magazine on a shelf, or turn on the only reliable radio or television station, and so on. Thus, even if both the speaker and hearer in question are epistemically impeccable, being situated in a massively unreliable epistemic environment can nonetheless prevent the acquisition of testimonial knowledge. So, let us reformulate the non-reductionist's view in the following way:

NR^{***}: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B knows that p on the basis of A's testimony if and only if:

(NR₁) B believes that p on the basis of the content of A's testimony,

(NR₂) B has no undefeated (psychological or normative) defeaters for A's testimony,

(NR₃) it is true that p ,

(NR₄) A's testimony is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive,

(NR₅) B is a reliable or properly functioning recipient of testimony,

and

(NR₆) the environment in which B receives A's testimony is suitable for the reception of reliable testimony.

There may, of course, be further conditions that need to be added to yield a fully satisfactory epistemology of testimony—for instance, though we have seen that the Reduction Thesis of reductionism is false, we have yet to evaluate the Positive Reasons Thesis of this view. My purpose here, however, is simply to show that NR^{***} expresses the minimal requirements for a non-reductionist account of testimonial knowledge. Thus, unlike the versions found in the current literature in the epistemology of testimony, a precise description of non-reductionism is that *properly functioning recipients*

that the testifier in question is reliable. Therefore, since my purpose at this point is to formulate the *minimal* requirements for a non-reductionist view of testimonial knowledge, and since a metareliability condition is considerably stronger than one on the epistemic environment, I shall include the latter condition rather than the former in my final version of non-reductionism.

of testimony may defeasibly acquire knowledge from the true reports of reliable speakers in an epistemically suitable environment.

Rejecting Non-Reductionism

Now that we have a precise characterization of non-reductionism with respect to testimonial knowledge, we can turn to assessing whether it is an epistemologically adequate view. To this end, notice that even with the addition of the conditions found in NR^{***}, it is central to the non-reductionist's view to altogether reject both versions of the reductionist's Positive Reasons Thesis, that is, to maintain that positive reasons are neither necessary nor sufficient for testimonial knowledge (justification/warrant) (and, accordingly, that testimonial knowledge (justification, warrant) is an irreducible epistemic source). Thus, the non-reductionist holds that, so long as the hearer is properly functioning and there is no evidence *against* accepting a speaker's report, the hearer has no positive epistemic work to do in order to acquire knowledge (justified/warranted belief) on the basis of the testimony in question. In what follows, however, I argue that this is false—hearers *do* have some positive work to do for testimonial knowledge (justification/warrant). Specifically, I show that although PR-N&S is false, PR-N is nevertheless true—that is, despite the fact that NESTED SPEAKER revealed that positive reasons cannot be *both* necessary *and* sufficient for testimonial justification/warrant, the possession of such reasons is nonetheless a necessary condition. Thus, I show that non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony is false.

To begin, notice that in denying even the weaker reading of the Positive Reasons Thesis of reductionism—i.e., PR-N—non-reductionists commit themselves to saying that testimonial knowledge can be acquired in the complete absence of *any* relevant positive reasons on the part of the hearer. Let us, therefore, consider such a case.

ALIEN: Sam, an average human being, is taking a walk through the forest one sunny morning and, in the distance, he sees someone drop a book. Although the individual's physical appearance enables Sam to identify her as an alien from another planet, he does not know anything about either this kind of alien or the planet from which she comes. Now, Sam eventually loses sight of the alien, but he is able to recover the book that she dropped. Upon opening it, he immediately notices that it appears to be written in English and looks like what we on Earth would call a diary. Moreover, after reading the first sentence of the book, Sam

forms the corresponding belief that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the author's planet during their exploration of Earth. It turns out that the book is a diary, the alien does communicate in English, and it is both true and reliably written in the diary that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the planet in question. Moreover, Sam is not only a properly functioning recipient of testimony, he is also situated in an environment that is suitable for the reception of reliable reports.³¹

Now, since the book in question is written by an alien, Sam truly has no epistemically relevant positive reasons: he has no common-sense alien-psychological theory, he has no beliefs about the general reliability of aliens as testifiers, he has no beliefs about the reliability of the author of this book, he has no beliefs about how "diaries" function in this alien society, and so on. Moreover, if Sam attends to the narrative voice of the author in the hope of trying to assess her competence and sincerity, he would be engaged in a fruitless activity since there is no reason to believe that signs of competence and sincerity on the planet in question correspond to these signs on Earth. Sam cannot even compare the content of the reports in this diary to his background beliefs since he does not know that the words in this book are used in the same way that we on Earth use them. So, here is a case in which a hearer truly fails to have any positive reasons on behalf of a speaker's testimony. Let us suppose, further, that there is nothing about the diary that provides Sam with relevant psychological or normative defeaters, and thus he clearly satisfies conditions (NR1)–(NR6) with respect to accepting the alien's testimony. The crucial question we now need to ask, then, is whether Sam knows that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the planet in question on the basis of the alien's diary.

Here the answer should clearly be no. Despite the fact that Sam's belief satisfies all of the conditions in NR^{***}, it seems plainly irrational epistemically for him to form the belief in question on the basis of the alien's testimony. For, it may very well be accepted practice in alien society to be insincere and deceptive when testifying to others. Or, normal alien psychology may be what we Earthlings would consider psychosis. Or, the language that the aliens use, though superficially indistinguishable from English, may really be Twenglish, where Twenglish uses the

³¹ Obviously, the mere fact that there is at present one alien in Sam's environment—who happens to be an extremely reliable testifier—does not at all call into question whether condition (NR6) is satisfied.

“negation” sign for affirming a proposition. Or, “diaries” in the alien society may be what we on Earth regard as science fiction, and so on. For all Sam knows when he reads the book, each of these scenarios is just as likely as the possibility that these aliens are reliable testifiers who speak English. But, in the absence of any way to discriminate among these possibilities, it seems clear that the appropriate epistemic response is to withhold belief.³²

It is of further interest to note that the general diagnosis offered of ALIEN appeals only to features to which non-reductionists are already committed. To see this, recall that a central condition of non-reductionism (expressed as NR2 above) requires that the hearer in question not possess any relevant undefeated defeaters for accepting a speaker’s report. For instance, if I believe that you frequently lie but nevertheless come to believe that owls are raptors on the basis of your testimony, then, according to non-reductionism, my testimonial belief fails to qualify as justified, warranted, or known, even if it is in fact true and reliably formed in an appropriate environment. Why? Because even non-reductionists agree that testimonial knowledge (justification/warrant) is incompatible with at least certain kinds of epistemic *irrationality*.³³ What ALIEN reveals, however, is that accepting a speaker’s report in the complete absence of positive reasons can be just as epistemically irrational as accepting such a report in the presence of an undefeated defeater—indeed, perhaps even more so. If I, for example, have an undefeated psychological defeater by virtue of believing that you *occasionally* lie, would it be more epistemically irrational for me to trust your testimony than it would be for Sam to trust the alien’s in the absence of positive reasons? Not at all. For while Sam knows *absolutely nothing* about the alien in question, I have all sorts of beliefs, both about humans in general and about you in particular, that are relevant to my acceptance of your testimony—for instance, I believe that humans often speak sincerely, that reports on Earth are usually offered to communicate information, that

³² It was suggested to me by Lizzie Fricker that another type of example that may make the same general point would be a person receiving testimony over the internet, with absolutely no epistemically relevant information about the source of the testimony. (Fricker also mentions this sort of case in her (2002).)

³³ Even outside the epistemology of testimony, this is a very widely accepted view. For instance, adding a no-defeater condition to theories of epistemic justification/warrant that are otherwise externalist has become the standard response given to the counterexamples found in Bonjour’s (1980 and 1985). See, for instance, Nozick (1981), Goldman (1986), and Plantinga (1993b).

you do not exhibit any clear signs of being deceptive, and so on. Against the background of all of this incredibly rich positive information, my belief that you merely occasionally lie seems rather epistemically insignificant when compared with the fact that Sam doesn't even know whether aliens actually speak English. Accepting testimony in the absence of positive reasons can, then, be even more irrational than accepting testimony in the presence of undefeated defeaters. Thus, by showing that epistemic irrationality is involved in accepting a speaker's report in the complete absence of positive reasons—even more so than in some cases in which undefeated defeaters are present—ALIEN poses a challenge to non-reductionists on their own terms.³⁴

Now, one way the non-reductionist may respond to ALIEN is to deny that Sam satisfies the relevant conditions in his acceptance of the contents of the "diary." Specifically, it may be argued that Sam fails the no-defeater condition because a context like that envisaged above, in which there is absolutely no epistemically relevant information about the speaker, report, or context, provides the hearer in question with evidence against the testimony in question. For instance, consider the following passage from Plantinga:

[Y]ou embark on a voyage of space exploration and land on a planet revolving about a distant sun. This planet has a favorable atmosphere, but you know little more about it. You crack the hatch, step out, and immediately find something that looks a lot like a radio; it periodically emits strings of sounds that, oddly enough, form sentences in English. The sentences emitted by this instrument express propositions only about topics of which you have no knowledge: what the weather is like in Beijing at the moment, whether Caesar had eggs on toast on the morning he crossed the Rubicon ... and the like. A bit unduly impressed with your find, you initially form the opinion that this quasi radio speaks the truth: that is, the propositions expressed (in English) by those sentences are true. But then you recall that you have no idea at all as to what the purpose of this apparent instrument is, whether it *has* a purpose, or how it came to be. You see that the probability of its being reliable, given what you know about it, is for you inscrutable. Then (in the absence of investigation) you have a defeater for your initial belief that the thing does, in fact, speak the truth ... If you don't have or get further information about its reliability, the reasonable course is agnosticism about that proposition. (Plantinga 2000: 224–5)

³⁴ I am grateful to comments from Joe Shieber that prompted the addition of this point.

The scenario described by Plantinga in this passage bears some striking similarities to that envisaged in ALIEN: in both cases, there is a testimonial source about which a hearer knows nothing at all, and the intuition we are invited to share is that it would be epistemically irrational for the hearer in question to form beliefs on the basis of this source. But, it may be asked, if the hearer possesses a defeater for trusting the radio in Plantinga's scenario, then why doesn't Sam possess a defeater for trusting the diary in ALIEN?

Rather than supporting non-reductionism, however, this response essentially concedes the necessity of positive reasons for testimonial justification or warrant. For, as both ALIEN and Plantinga's scenario are described, there is nothing about the source in question that suggests that its reports are either false or unreliable. If, for instance, the "diary" found in the forest had written in it that bison laid eggs, or the "radio" found on the new planet reported that Abraham Lincoln and Sigmund Freud were currently at lunch together, then the hearers may rightly be described as possessing undefeated defeaters for the corresponding beliefs. But the only negative reason it is appropriate to say that Sam has with respect to the alien's diary or that you have regarding the radio is *the absence of positive reasons*. Since the fundamental difference between reductionism and non-reductionism is precisely over the need for positive reasons, it is simply not available to the non-reductionist to claim that defeaters are present in such cases. Otherwise put, if the complete absence of positive reasons amounts to the presence of a defeater, then non-reductionism essentially collapses into reductionism on this issue.

A second response the non-reductionist may offer to ALIEN can be extracted from the view found in Goldberg and Henderson (2006).³⁵ According to Goldberg and Henderson, the non-reductionist need not sanction gullibility or irrationality on the part of a hearer in a testimonial exchange since such a view can incorporate a "monitoring requirement" into her epistemology of testimony. In particular, it is not enough on such a view that a hearer merely does not possess undefeated defeaters for a given testimonial belief; the hearer must also be actively monitoring for their presence.³⁶ Now, applying this response to the context at hand, the non-reductionist may argue that, while reading the alien's diary,

³⁵ A similar view with respect to mundane testimony can be found in Fricker (1994 and 1995).

³⁶ According to Goldberg and Henderson, actively monitoring requires "*being on the lookout*" for defeaters rather than the stronger "*going out and looking*" for them (Goldberg and Henderson 2006: 610).

Sam must be monitoring for the presence of any signs of the author's being either incompetent or insincere. And being on the lookout for defeaters in this way, it may be urged, renders Sam's acceptance of the contents of the diary not irrational, as is suggested in the original ALIEN case.

By way of response to this move, there are two points I should like to make. First, with respect to ALIEN, both non-reductionists who require monitoring and those who do not arrive at the same verdict: Sam comes to know that tigers have eaten some of the inhabitants of the planet in question on the basis of the alien's diary.³⁷ For, as was emphasized above, there is nothing about the situation described in ALIEN that suggests that the reports found in the diary are either false or unreliable. So, even if it is required that the recipient of testimony be on the lookout for counterevidence, there are not any relevant defeaters present for her to pick up on in ALIEN, thereby delivering precisely the counterintuitive consequence at issue. Moreover, if the non-reductionist then argues that the mere absence of positive reasons provides the monitoring hearer with a defeater, then this amounts to the first response above which, as I argued, essentially collapses into reductionism. Second, notice that it is entirely unclear, and indeed doubtful, that monitoring in a situation such as that found in ALIEN even makes sense as a meaningful requirement. For, as I emphasized above, Sam has no common-sense alien-psychological theory, he has no information about the general reliability of aliens as testifiers, he has no beliefs about how diaries function in this alien society, he has no reason to think that signs of competence and sincerity on the planet in question correspond to these signs on Earth, and so on. Given this, what exactly would Sam's monitoring while reading the alien's diary accomplish? Sure, he may be monitoring the alien's diary in the same way he would monitor a fellow human's, but why think that this would be an effective strategy for detecting defeaters in this alien society? The upshot of these considerations is that the addition of a monitoring requirement does nothing

³⁷ This should come as no surprise given that standard versions of non-reductionism will regard the so-called monitoring requirement proposed by Goldberg and Henderson as simply being subsumed by the no-normative-defeater requirement. For instance, if Greta should be, but is not, suspicious of Raul's honesty regarding his whereabouts last night, the standard non-reductionist will say that she has a normative defeater for his testimony that he was at Starbuck's, while Goldberg and Henderson will say that she was not properly monitoring Raul's testimony for signs of incompetence and insincerity. But the verdict that these two views arrive at is the same.

to help the non-reductionist avoid the counterintuitive consequences found in ALIEN.

A third strategy for denying the force of ALIEN is to argue that the non-reductionist's principle applies only to testimony offered by humans because only those who are members of *our* institution of testimony fall under it. The aliens may very well have their own institution of testimony on their planet, and their practices and epistemic principles may be quite similar to ours. But we cannot assume this similarity. Non-reductionism would thus be limited in its applicability to only members of our species and, accordingly, Sam would fail to acquire knowledge (justified/warranted belief) on the basis of the alien's testimony.

An obvious response to this objection is simply to modify the counterexample so that the testifier in question is in fact a member of our institution of testimony. For instance, suppose that Sally has been in a coma for the past two months and, upon waking, discovers that she has lost all of her previous knowledge except for her competence with the English language. Upon leaving the hospital, she stumbles upon a diary of an unknown author and begins reading it. Now, *ex hypothesi*, Sally no longer has common-sense beliefs about human psychology, she no longer has beliefs about the general reliability of humans as testifiers, she no longer has beliefs about how diaries function in our society, and so on. Is Sally justified in accepting the contents of the diary? Since this case is similar to the alien example in all *epistemically relevant* respects, the answer must be no. So, restricting the scope of non-reductionism to humans will not avoid this objection.

Furthermore, it seems that the primary explanation for why different epistemic standards would be invoked, depending on whether the speaker in question is a human or an alien, is precisely that we have all sorts of *epistemically relevant beliefs about our institution of testimony, and fail to have them in the case of the aliens*. For consider: why aren't we entitled to assume that the aliens are like us in all relevant respects? The natural answer seems to be that we do not have any *reason* to believe that this is the case. Thus, the very criterion for saying who is or is not a member of our institution of testimony is simply whether we have positive reasons for their testimony—which begs the question.

We have seen, then, that the hearer must also do her part in a testimonial exchange by having at least some epistemically relevant positive reasons for accepting the report in question. Thus, PR-N is true and, accordingly, even the version of non-reductionism found in NR*** fails to provide an adequate epistemology of testimony. The two dominant views of the epistemic status of testimonial beliefs, then—reductionism and non-reductionism—are both false.