

There is only “Philosophy”

The case of testimony

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The present introduction summarises the debate on the epistemological value of testimony, with a special focus on the reductionism vs. antireductionism polemics, and situates Indian philosophers within it. One thus sees that some Indian philosophical schools (especially Vaiśeṣika and Buddhist epistemology) attempted to reduce testimony to another, more fundamental, instrument of knowledge, typically to inference, whereas others (especially Mīmāṃṣā and Nyāya) emphasised the independent nature of testimony. The study then moves to the problem of the criteria for a reliable speaker and discusses border-line cases, such as that of speaking instruments (computers, clocks and the like). Finally, it looks at some promising and open-ended topics evoked by the Indian-European dialogue on testimony.

1. General introduction to the series¹

Ideally, the panel which lies at the basis of the present collection is the first of a series of panels dedicated to the purpose of doing “Just philosophy”. I chose the topic of the epistemology of testimony because it is one of the fields where a comparison can be fruitful and where the way for this interaction has already been paved (see next section). A further step within the same enterprise is the series of articles edited by myself and Malcolm Keating which is appearing at regular intervals on *Journal of World Philosophies*.

2. A short prehistory of the current debate

The field of the epistemology of testimony is both ancient and new in European and Anglo-American philosophy. Given that testimony is unavoidable (we acquire from testimony most of our cognitions, starting with our name until what most of us know about the Higgs boson), one can find scattered remarks about it all over the history of philosophy, especially in the contexts of the philosophy of language, of hermeneutics and of epistemology, not to speak about its treatment in the legal theory.

¹ I am grateful to Roy Tzohar for his comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

However, until relatively recent there was little specialised literature about it. Apart from the “classical” opposition between David Hume (1711–1776) and Thomas Reid (1710–1796), only a few authors such as Elizabeth Fricker (apart from her PhD thesis, Fricker 1986, one might read Fricker and Cooper 1987 and Fricker 1982) and Antony Coady (see most of all his ground-breaking and thought-provoking Coady 1992) wrote about the epistemology of testimony before the mid-1990s.²

What worked as a catalyser for the launch of the epistemology of testimony was, in my reconstruction, the volume edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Bimal Krishna Matilal (who died before the volume could be finished) in 1994 with the title *Knowing from words* (Matilal and Chakrabarti 1994)³. Matilal and Chakrabarti managed to gather some of the most interesting Analytical philosophers and to have them reflect on a topic which is central in Indian philosophy but was less so in European and Anglo-American philosophy. Ideally, the volume was meant as a dialogue of Indian and Anglo-American analytical philosophers, along the lines of a previous attempt, namely the volume *Analytical Philosophy in Comparative Perspective* (edited by Bimal Krishna Matilal and Jaysankar Lal Shaw in the same prestigious Synthese Library, in 1985). The volume contributed to the establishment of the epistemology of testimony as a separate field of epistemology. For instance, Elizabeth Fricker’s essay in the volume, programmatically entitled *Against Gullibility* has been quoted in the great part of the subsequent articles on testimony⁴ as the paradigmatic instantiation of local (or ‘minimal’) reductionism (about which, see *infra*, section 3). Further, it has contributed to the attempts to establish a dialogic contact between Indian and Anglo-American epistemologies (see, e.g., Arnold 2001, reworked into the part two of Arnold 2005, where Kumārila’s and Alston’s views are discussed side-by-side). Nonetheless, it cannot be said that it really launched a long-lasting new way of looking at epistemology.

Among reasons for the partial failure of the 1994 volume to establish a dialogue about the topic one might mention the traditional closure of Classical Indian philosophy (as it is practised until now), the symmetrical closure of Analytical philosophy to whatever comes from distant times (and languages), but perhaps also the fact that a corpus of Indian philosophical texts accessible to non-

² A longer list should include also articles dealing with related subjects, such as Lackey 1999, Welbourne 1979 (transmission of knowledge); Hardwig 1991, Ross 1986, Webb 1993 (trust); Burge 1993 (communication).

³ Note that Matilal and Chakrabarti managed to gather contributions from Coady, Fricker, Welbourne and from other authors who had not yet written specifically on the topic of testimony but kept on doing it after 1994, such as K. Lehrer, J. McDowell and J.N. Mohanty. Furthermore, they persuaded already influential philosophers such as G.G. Brittan, M. Dummett, P.F. Strawson and S. Bhattacharya, to deal specifically with the issue.

⁴ And this in many different languages and philosophical contexts. See, only *exempli gratia*, Böhm 2006, 23–25, 31; Origgi 2006; Lackey 2008, chapter 5; Schindler-Wunderlich 2008, 92 and chapter 2.4.7; Brito 2012, chapter 2; Kornblith 2013, 214.

Sanskritists (or non-Tibetologists, non-Pālists, etc.) is still lacking. Thus, when, e.g., a European philosopher after having read Sibajiban Bhattacharya's fascinating essay wants to dwell further in the topic of Indian Logic, she has little to refer to.

The present working group, consequently, aims at working further in the direction of creating a philosophical dialogue on the topic of the epistemology of testimony, with some special focuses:

- We are doing “just Philosophy”, i.e., the philosophical questions should be on the foreground, whereas the historical context, the textual material and other philological issues are discussed insofar as they are functional to a deeper philosophical understanding

- Our work must be soundly grounded in texts and in their history, so that readers can verify what we say and continue our research

- We are committed to highlight points of contact but also differences, so that the dialogue can be a really enriching experience and not a chance for European and Anglo-American philosophers to see that Indian philosophy was “almost as good” as their own one (cf. the concern of the Indian philosophers writing in English and never being “good enough” for Westerners to be considered as their peers, Bhushan and Garfield 2011, xiv)

- The Philosophical enterprise is not limited to the European and Anglo-American world, but the inclusion of Classical Indian philosophy should also not be enough to content us (in other words: we are not lobbying for *Indian* philosophy to be admitted within philosophy, but for *philosophy* to be enriched through new questions and perspectives, wherever they come from).

3. Introducing the debate

3.1. Reductionism and Anti-reductionism

The topic of testimony is of central importance in several domains. In Europe, it has been dealt with — well before it became a distinct philosophical topic — within Legal thought, History (since in both cases the role of the witness is central) and Bible exegesis. In India, it is noteworthy that before it crystallised into a certain pattern, the topic of testimony had already a long history (in the dharmaśāstra context, in the Mīmāṃsā exegesis, etc.). For instance, before the main exponents of the Buddhist epistemological school ruled out testimony from the number of epistemological instruments (on this topic see Krasser 2012) the value of the Buddha's word had already been the object of a complex exegesis (see, on this topic, Tzohar's contribution to this volume). This early history of the reflection on the topic of testimony left long-lasting traces on its later development (for instance, in Europe the centrality of the role of the witness, in India the importance of exegesis, see Eltschinger 2013).

However, after a certain point, the debate on testimony started being dominated, both in Indian and in European philosophy, by some basic dichotomies. First comes the dichotomy between reductionism and anti-reductionism. The first aims at reducing testimony to other instruments of knowledge. In India, this has meant trying to reduce it to inference, whereas in Europe “reductionists argue that the epistemic status of testimony is ultimately reducible to sense perception, memory and inductive inference” (Lackey 2008, 141). The difference is less broad than one might think, given that the role of perception (of the heard words) and of memory is not denied in Indian philosophy but just thought to be not problematic (like the fact that smoke is perceived in the case of the inference of fire from smoke does not invalidate its inferential status).

In Europe, David Hume has been considered the herald of “global reductionism”,⁵ whereas Elizabeth Fricker is, among others, credited to have introduced “local reductionism” into the debate. In India, Buddhist Pramāṇavāda authors and Vaiśeṣika champion the view that testimony is a subset of inference but both try to reduce particular instances of testimony to particular inferences and never attempt the global reductionism endorsed by Hume (i.e., since we have seen again and again instances of testimony matching with reality, we can globally trust testimony because of inductive reasons, see Hume 1977, 74). Buddhist Pramāṇavādas and Vaiśeṣikas (and Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā authors, who only accept the Veda as an autonomous source of knowledge and reduce ordinary communication to inference) have different ways to reduce testimony to inference. As will be discussed below by Alessandro Graheli, part of the problem relies in the difficulty of construing a valid syllogism in the case of testimony. If, as one might be inclined to do and as the Vaiśeṣikas tried to do, one construes linguistic expressions (*śabda*) as *probans* for the *probandum*, i.e., their meaning (*artha*), then what would be the locus (*pakṣa*)? An alternative route would be the following chain of syllogisms:

X says that p

if X says that p, then X wants to express (*vivakṣā*) p, because he uttered it (from language to thought)

if X wants to express p, then p exists in the world, because X is a reliable speaker (*āpta*) (from thought to ontology)

thus, p

⁵ However, Alex Gelfert noticed that Hume’s reductionism is in fact far from being global and that such reconstructions are chiefly based on his critique of miracles and not on his assessment of everyday communication, see Gelfert (2010).

In this case, one needs to have already secured the information that X is a reliable speaker, due to previous instances of her reliability.⁶

By contrast, Thomas Reid is probably the best known pre-modern anti-reductionist in Europe. In his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764, the only critical edition is Reid 1997) he explained that we do not have to construe inferences in order to believe what we are said. By contrast, God has instilled in us two principles, the Principle of Veracity, which inclines us to tell the truth, and the Principle of Credulity, which inclines us to believe what we are told. The success of testimony as instrument of knowledge depends on these two and not on any inferential process. In India, the Mīmāṃsā school is radically anti-reductionist, whereas the case of Nyāya is more complex and will lead me to highlight some fundamental differences between the European and Anglo-American epistemological debates and the Indian one.

3.2. At mid-way: the case of Nyāya

In India, the epistemological debate necessarily includes the question as for the source of the validity (*prāmāṇya*) of a cognition. Is this extrinsic (*parataḥ*) or intrinsic (*svataḥ*)? If the former, a cognition depends on something else in order to become knowledge. If the latter, every cognition is by itself and by default entitled to be called knowledge, unless and until the opposite is proved. In Western terms one might say that this last position is akin to falsificationism.

It is easy to see that Mīmāṃsā, being an upholder of intrinsic validity, can neatly maintain that testimony does not need anything else to be considered valid. The situation is slightly more complicated in the case of Nyāya, which upholds the extrinsicity of validity in the case of all cognitions. Thus, all cognitions need an additional reason to be considered valid, be it the validation through another instrument of knowledge (e.g., X through sight sees his father speaking, then the validity of this visual perception is confirmed by the auditory perception of his voice) or through the awareness of some additional qualities of the source (e.g., X knows that his eyes are in excellent conditions because of a recent sight-test and his father is not too far nor in bad light). Testimony is

⁶ The topic of the complex task to be faced by Indian reductionism is admirably dealt with by John Taber, see Taber 1996. Its critical review (Siderits 1998) does not deal with Taber's reconstruction of the reductionist's strategies.

not an exception to this and stands in need of a further validation, typically through the additional quality of having been uttered by a reliable speaker (*āpta*).⁷

What differentiates the Nyāya position from the chain of syllogisms described above in the previous section? According to Nyāya, the reliability of the speaker is an additional quality of the source, it is not the *probans* of an inference. By contrast, Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā authors maintain that, whenever one hears someone uttering “p” the natural power of language to communicate a meaning (a natural power which remain undisturbed in the case of the Veda) is interrupted by one’s suspicions concerning the reliability of the speaker, so that one needs to rapidly go through the syllogistic sequence described above. By the time the natural communicative power of language is finally restored, one already knows that p and, hence, the linguistic communication only repeats something already known and does not deliver any new information independently of inference. In Anglo-American terms, the Reductionist Thesis requires that there “wouldn’t be any difference between the epistemic status of the *testimonial belief being reduced* and the *positive reasons doing the reducing*” (Lackey 2008, 151), but this is exactly the case with Nyāya, where the reasons for believing that X is a reliable speaker are not the same for believing the content of what X says.

4. The reliability-problems

4.1. Valid testimony grounded on the author or on language itself

This leads me to a further dichotomy, the one concerning, among anti-reductionists, the justification of testimony. In India, this basic dichotomy can be summarised through the positions, once again, of Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā. The former makes the validity of testimony dependent on the validity of its source (which should be a reliable speaker).⁸ The latter, by contrast, considers testimony per se valid, due to the natural communicative power of language itself.⁹ In this sense, what Mīmāṃsā speaks about can be hardly described as “testimony”, since the role of the witness (*testis* in Latin) is not at all needed. The Sanskrit term, shared by all philosophical schools of Classical Indian philosophy, namely

⁷ Thus, of the two questions Lackey uses to identify reductionists and antireductionists, Nyāya authors answer yes to the first and no to the second: “[F]irst, 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 nonreductionists respond negatively, to both of these questions” (Lackey 2008, 141).

⁸ This scheme includes also the position of Buddhist Pramāṇavādins, who can accept testimony as a valid testimony only if uttered by a reliable speaker, and of many other Buddhist authors, see Tzohar’s contribution in this volume.

⁹ A somehow related position is Bhartṛhari’s one, see Ferrante’s contribution in this volume.

śabdapramāṇa ‘language as an instrument of knowledge’, is more neutral and made me prefer the somehow longer paraphrase “Linguistic Communication as an instrument of knowledge”, which is more neutral than “testimony” as for the role of the speaker. Thus, in the following I will shift to this term.

Coming back to the dichotomy just exposed, many Medieval Islamic authors explicitly endorsed the former view, although the dominant Sunni views regarded (Qur’ānic) language as an eternal attribute of God, thus in some way considering it as pre-existing any human communicative act. This principle was particularly important to the Zāhirī school, leading the Zāhiriyya to a strict textual interpretation of the Qur’ān, one which presupposed that God had expressed Himself completely and perfectly in the text and that one needed not to look for His intentions beyond it – a position which interestingly enough resembles the Mīmāṃsā approach to Vedic exegesis.¹⁰ In European and Anglo-American philosophy, contemporary authors like Michael Dummett (Dummett 1994), Józef Maria Bocheński (Bocheński 1974, see Rostalska’s contribution in the present volume), Jennifer Lackey (e.g., Lackey 2009) and Sanford Goldberg (e.g., Goldberg 2013) uphold the former view, whereas authors such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer have highlighted the priority of language over the speaker and can thus be considered closer to the latter scheme.¹¹

4.2. Linguistic Communication grounding the other instruments of knowledge?

A step further is that of Bhartṛhari, who criticises inference, deemed not to be a valid source of knowledge in the case of non perceptible items (see the next chapter concerning the opposition among fields of knowledge) and presents language as an all-pervasive reality. Going in this direction, one might even hypothesise that the very direct perception depends on linguistic communication, since there is no non-discursive direct perception and our perception is always a perception of something we can recognise/think of/describe linguistically. Consequently, Linguistic Communication as an instrument of knowledge can evolve in an underlying *prasiddhi*, the discursive knowledge which everyone shares, so that no precise source can be pinpointed. How do we know,

¹⁰ I am grateful to Marco Lauri for interesting discussions on this topic. Mistakes remain entirely mine.

¹¹ This is partly an oversimplification since it neglects the distinction (about which see the Introduction in Matilal and Chakrabarti 1994) between *śabda* ‘language’ and *śabdapramāṇa* ‘language as an instrument of knowledge.’ In other words, the fact that an author emphasises the independence of language from a speaker does not automatically mean that she would subscribe to the idea that also language as an instrument of knowledge is independent of a speaker. However, for historical reasons (see above, beginning of section 3.1.), the debate about testimony in Europe has the witness as its centre and in this sense Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s positions are already strikingly audacious.

e.g., that we need to eat in order not to die out of starvation? Not through specific scientific studies (which at most can be used to *justify* such notion) and not even through specific directives. Rather, according to *prasiddhi*, explains Abhinavagupta in the XXIV chapter of his *Tantrāloka*. In this way, Bhartṛhari and later Abhinavagupta revert the (European?) idea of “instinct:” it is not a (mysterious) non-conceptual instinct which enables us to do things we have not explicitly been taught to do, but rather a conceptual knowledge which is so common that we are not aware of how we acquired it (perhaps in a previous life, adds Abhinavagupta).

4.3. Criteria for a valid speaker (and listener)

Embracing the Nyāya scheme leads to a further question, namely, what are the criteria to identify a reliable source? Typically, Nyāya authors say that she must be competent (she must have had direct experience of what she speaks about), honest and moved by the desire to speak. All three criteria may be debated. The former because, as it is formulated in Nyāya, it rules out the possibility of a chain of transmission of testimony (which is, by contrast, accepted and praised in Islamic thought, see Lauri’s contribution in the present volume). Why should not one accept a chain of witnesses? In the case of Indian philosophy, and especially of Nyāya, the problem might have to do with the fact that in this case the role of memory would become unavoidable. And memory as an active faculty (i.e., not as a sheer repository of notions) cannot be admitted among instruments of knowledge, since it is often unreliable.¹²

Beside that, what else is implied by the requisite of competence? A possible output of this requisite is the idea (explicit in Bocheński) that one’s linguistic communication can be a valid instrument of knowledge only in the case that the linguistic communication’s field overlaps with the field on which we have a specific epistemological competence. In other words, being a world-expert of nuclear biology does not mean that one is a world-expert of science in general. More interestingly, the field of what is does not overlap with that of what has to be done (see below, end of this section), so that an expert able to describe what has happened (e.g., a historian who has been able to reconstruct all stages of a certain recent war) will not necessarily be also able to prescribe what

¹² A further argument (suggested during the final round table of this panel by Artemij Keidan) is that through history linguistic expressions see their meanings changed so that a chain of transmitters testifying that “X is p” would end up testifying something else due to the fact that “X ” and “p” may have acquired a new meaning. But such considerations cannot play a role in the a-temporal perspective of Mīmāṃsā and I do not know of any such discussion in Nyāya or Buddhist Pramāṇavāda either.

should happen next. This opposition is of fundamental importance in Mīmāṃsā (for which only the Veda can be an independent source of knowledge regarding what has to be done), whereas Nyāya authors do not see an a priori irreducible distinction between the two fields. The author of the Veda, for instance, is described by Nyāya authors as being necessarily omniscient since he has uttered also the Āyurveda, whose validity is extrinsically tested.¹³

The second criterion, that of the sincerity of the speaker, may also be debated, because it leads to the problem one might label as “the misled liar”, i.e., to cases in which someone wants to lie but happens to say the truth by mistake. Is the cognition one acquires in this case valid? Since it lacks one of the criteria for validity, one should be forced to say that it is not, although it is in itself identical with a genuine piece of information (about the problem of justification in Nyāya, see Sibajiban Bhattacharyya’s contributions). Further, how is one to judge of sincerity? If it is defined as conformity to one’s beliefs, this can lead to further problems. In fact, even if one does not want to renounce to justification and is ready to reject the misled liar’s testimony as a case of knowledge-communication, one might still be puzzled by the case of a speaker who erroneously believes that *p*, but has good reasons for conveying *s* and does so (e.g., he believes that the Eiffel Tower is left from his standpoint, but after looking at his map he decides to tell to the questioning tourist that it is at his right, and rightly so). This second speaker is a reliable speaker, although he does not believe what he is saying. Within contemporary epistemology, also Jennifer Lackey has discussed interesting examples of people who do not believe what they are saying and are nonetheless reliable witnesses (in her case: a biology teacher who teaches evolution although she believes in creationism) and has, accordingly, stated that “the proper focus in the epistemology of testimony should be on what speakers say, not on what they believe” (Lackey 2008, 141).

The latter criterion is particularly intriguing to me because I have only found it in Indian philosophy and in Bocheński 1974 (see Rostalska’s contribution in the present volume).

Until now I have briefly outlined the requisites of the speaker. A related problem might be that of the requisites of the hearer (see Sudipta Munsī’s contribution in the present volume).

Further, how would such criteria fit in the case of non-descriptive statements? In which sense is one’s “competence” involved when uttering a valid command? Bocheński’s distinction between an

¹³ For the Nyāya-Mīmāṃsā debate about this topic see Freschi and Graheli 2005. Franco 1997 explains that Buddhist Pramāṇavādins adopt the Nyāya approach.

epistemic and a deontic authority (which independently repeats the *sādhya-siddha* opposition typical of classical Indian debates) might be of help here.

Similarly, also instances of non-informative statements should be separately dealt with. When, for instance, Jennifer Lackey lists among cases of “testimony” “reports about the time of the 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” (Lackey 2008, 147), she is in fact listing many cases of speech acts which are not meant to be primarily informative but have rather different purposes. For instance, speaking about how attractive one’s husband looks might be meant to convey that one is in love with him to a flirting colleague, talking about one’s children could be a way to bond with other parents and so on. Therefore, such speech acts should not be subsumed in the set of testimonially conveyed *knowledge*.

5. The hermeneutical problems

By contrast, if one assumes, as Mīmāṃsā authors do, that language by itself communicates, unless and until this communication is blocked by external factors (such as unreliable speakers), one is confronted with a different set of problems. First of all, does the fact that the text (oral or written) is in itself communicative legitimate any possible reading of it? Few philosophers have embraced this position in Europe and no one –as far as my knowledge reaches– in pre-contemporary India. Thus, in both scenarios the acknowledgement of the communicative power of the text has rather led to an inquiry into the exegetical rules needed to uncover the *right* meaning(s) of the text. In some cases, exegesis has been used also by thinkers upholding the idea of a reliable author as the foundation of Linguistic Communication, in cases where such an author was too remote to speak for himself and one needed to reconstruct his intent out of the text only (see Tzohar’s contribution for the case of the Buddha).

6. Further problems and applications

Ideally, the trans-philosophical debate should be able to creatively approach also new topics, which are not part of each tradition’s background. Among such problems there is the following one:

- Can one speak of linguistic communication as an instrument of knowledge also in the case of non-conscious communicators?

Indian authors tend to be consistent in maintaining that linguistic communication needs to happen through spoken language. Writing is, by contrast, a case of inference since one infers out of

the written signs their spoken form. This idea can be historically explained also through the fact that silent readings was not used in Classical India and that one, indeed, used to pronounce aloud what one was reading. Given the changed historical conditions, one might hold nowadays a different opinion about writing, even more so since also in the case of writing one can usually identify a source and discuss its reliability. The case of non-conscious sources is more complex. I suspect that Classical Indian authors would believe clocks and thermometers to deliver information just like gestures do, i.e., by delivering inferential signs of something else. In other words, if I am not wrong, we know that it is 8 am after having seen our watch because we infer this information from the position of the hour hand.¹⁴ But what about the case of a voiced clock actually pronouncing the words “It is 8 o’clock”? If one were to refute to it the status of being an instance of linguistic communication, then, what would be the difference between this case and the case (described by a well-known anti-reductionist, A. Coady) of a unknown voice in a call centre who informs us about how much we need to pay for our phone bill? The person who is communicating it to us is just reading the information from a computer monitor and is hardly performing anything more than an automatic answering machine would have been able to do.

The working group whose results are published here convened within the forth Coffee Break Conference (and then again in Athens in 2015), but the topic of Linguistic Communication has been discussed also within the previous one (CBC 3). This has led me to consider the use of linguistic communication as an instrument of knowledge in extra-philosophical fields, such as the usage of witnesses in anthropology, development studies, history, statistics, law and the like. It is my hope that a thorough reflection about it will take place in a close future, in order to investigate the basis of disciplines dealing with so-called “empirical” data which, in fact, often depend strictly on linguistic accounts.

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¹⁴ However, another scholar of Indian epistemology, Matthew Dasti, maintains that clocks and the like are instances of Linguistic Communication, see Dasti 2008. Dasti accepted that his position might be a partly departure from Nyāya in the online discussion of his article: <http://elisafreschi.blogspot.co.at/2013/04/testimony-and-requisites-of-witness.html> and <http://elisafreschi.blogspot.co.at/2013/05/requisites-of-listener.html>

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