

# Refining Reid's Principle of Credulity

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## Note

This is the handout distributed during the talk I delivered at the March 2010 conference “Thomas Reid: From His Time to Ours” held in Aberdeen and Glasgow. It should not be considered to be a finished academic paper: arguments are missing or only sketched and hardly any references to contemporary authors are given. The paper I plan to write on the basis of this talk will remedy these deficiencies.

## 1 Introduction

In “On Denoting”, Russell (1905, pp. 484–485) wrote about the importance of puzzles:

A logical theory may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science.

Russell's admonition applies to philosophical theories generally. It should be noted that puzzles for Russell are not problems or questions, but facts or observations, in his case about denoting phrases, that any theory must accommodate. Russell goes on to show that his theory can account for the puzzling features of denoting phrases he lists, but other theories cannot. In fact, those features are inconsistent with those other accounts. Similarly, in the course of my talk, I will mention a number of puzzling features about testimony that any account of it must accommodate. The account I propose does this, but hardly any other contemporary accounts do. These features are collected together at the end of this handout.

## 2 An Account of Testimony Inspired by Thomas Reid

### 2.1 Introduction

Just over ten years ago, I became interested in testimony and, fortunately, came across a summary of Reid's views soon afterwards. That led me to Section 24 of Chapter VI of *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764):

The wise and beneficent Author of Nature, who intended that we should be social creatures, and that we should receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge by the information of others, hath, for these purposes, implanted in our natures two principles that tally with each other.

The first of these principles is, a propensity to speak truth, and to use the signs of language, so as to convey our real sentiments. This principle has a powerful operation, even in the greatest liars; for where they lie once, they speak truth a hundred times. Truth is always uppermost, and is the natural issue of the mind. It requires no art or training, no inducement or temptation, but only that we yield to a natural impulse. Lying, on the contrary, is doing violence to our nature; and is never practised, even by the worst men, without some temptation.

On the following page he presents the principle which governs our response to testimony:

Another original principle implanted in us by the Supreme Being, is a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us. This is the counterpart to the former; and as that may be called *the principle of veracity*, we shall, for want of a proper name, call this *the principle of credulity*. It is unlimited in children, until they meet with instances of deceit and falsehood: and it retains a very considerable degree of strength through life.

### 2.2 The Principle of Credulity

The principle of credulity seems to me to be basically correct. We do have a powerful innate tendency to accept testimony. By saying that this propensity is unlimited in children and, thus, limited in adults, Reid acknowledges that it can be resisted or overridden. However, principles are different from dispositions, tendencies and propensities; these things should not be conflated. These observations lead me to the following refinement of Reid's views: People do have a strong tendency to accept testimony; they respond to testimony as if that response were governed by the defeasible *acquisition rule*: 'Accept others' assertions.' It is the fact that this rule is defeasible that makes it interesting. Furthermore, implicit in what Reid says is the observation that overriding factors are learnt. This has at least two consequences: (1) The way in which people respond to propositional information changes over time. (2) Not everybody necessarily responds to the same piece of propositional information in the same way.

### 2.3 The Principle of Veracity

I also think that the principle of veracity is basically correct, but it is not what we need in order to account for the spread of propositional information. For that we need to see the social practice of assertion interacting with our tendency to accept testimony: Two mechanisms account

for the spread of propositional information through communities over time, namely our disposition to accept testimony and our ability to make information available to others. It should be noted that we are recipients of propositional information before we become originators or, indeed, transmitters of such information. I shall say more about this claim below.

### 3 The Primacy and Predominance of Testimony

#### 3.1 The Marginalisation of Testimony

Testimony is ignored or, at best, marginalised in modern philosophy. Perceptual knowledge is seen as the best or only kind of knowledge. These assumptions persist to the present day. For example, Dretske (1993, p. 333) writes: ‘Perceptual knowledge is knowledge acquired by or through the senses. This includes most of what we know. Some would say it includes *everything* we know.’ Pollock (1987, p. 486) says, ‘Perception represents the basic source of human knowledge.’ Similar quotations could be easily multiplied.

To understand why testimony has been marginalised we need to recall what modern philosophy replaced: scholasticism. The Schoolmen loved their books, especially the Bible and the works of Aristotle. Lewis (1964, p. 5) stresses ‘the overwhelmingly bookish or clerly character of medieval culture.’ He continues:

When we speak of the Middle Ages as the ages of authority we are usually thinking about the authority of the Church. But they were the age not only of her authority, but of authorities. If their culture is regarded as a response to environment, then the elements in that environment to which it responded most rigorously were manuscripts. Every writer, if he possibly can, bases himself on an earlier writer, follows an *auctour*: preferably a Latin one. This is one of the things that differentiate the period almost equally from savagery and from our modern civilisation. In a savage community you absorb your culture, in part unconsciously, from participation in the immemorial pattern of behaviour, and in part by word of mouth, from the old men of the tribe. In our own society most knowledge depends, in the last resort, on observation. But the Middle Ages depended predominantly on books. Though literacy was of course far rarer than now, reading was in one way a more important ingredient of the total culture.

If a Schoolman wanted to know something about the world, he would turn to the written works of some authority to see what they had to say about the matter. Tradition was sacrosanct. The Scientific Revolution, which started around 1550, changed all that. Scientists, such as Galileo, started carrying out experiments to discover what actually happens in nature. In *The Life of Galileo*, Brecht (1994, p. 7) has Galileo say: ‘What is written in the old books is no longer good enough. For where faith has been enthroned for a thousand years doubt now sits. Everyone says: right, that’s what it says in the books, but let’s have a look for ourselves. That most solemn truths are being familiarly nudged; what was never doubted before is doubted now.’ Galileo and other scientists were incredibly successful in uncovering the secrets of nature by observing what was going on around them and by conducting experiments. This approach to acquiring knowledge was very different from that of the Schoolmen. Instead of looking to

tradition to find answers to the questions that interested them, these early scientists put their faith in what they themselves could observe going on around them.

The new experimental approach was accompanied by a new epistemology, *empiricism*, that saw all knowledge as being derived from sense experience. Bacon was the champion of this new approach and he believed that the rigorous application of the scientific method would eventually yield everything that was worth knowing about the universe. His ideas led to the formation of the Royal Society in England. This was established at Gresham College in 1660 and given a Royal Charter in 1662. Its motto was, and still is, *nullius in verba* (take nobody's word for it). In other words, in order to learn the secrets of nature you need to carry out experiments, rather than read what has been preserved in tradition.

### 3.2 The Rehabilitation of Testimony

Coady more than anybody else has rehabilitated the study of testimony in philosophy, but he still only wants to put testimony on an equal footing with perception, memory and inference. Coady (1992, p. 6) writes:

Modern epistemologists tirelessly pursue the nature and role of memory, perception, inductive and deductive reasoning but devote no analysis and argument to testimony although *prima facie* it belongs on this list. After all when we inquire into the basis of some claim by asking: 'Why do you believe that?' or 'How do you know that?' the answer 'Jones told me' can be just as appropriate as 'I saw it' or 'I remember it', 'It follows from this' or 'It usually happens like that'.

I am going to argue, however, for the primacy of testimony and the paucity of perceptual knowledge: Our ability to make judgements about our perceptual environment presupposes that we are in possession of information that could only have been acquired through testimony and perceptual knowledge is actually very rare.

### 3.3 Empiricism

As already mentioned, empiricism is the theory that all knowledge is derived from sense experience. However, there are two large categories of counter-examples to the weaker claim that all *empirical* knowledge is derived from sense experience. The first consists of statements like 'Jimmy Porter is a character in *Look Back in Anger*' and 'Desdemona is the daughter of Brabantio in Shakespeare's *Othello*'. The second contains claims like 'Dummett was influenced by mathematical intuitionism which was founded by Brouwer' and 'Russell and Frege were logicians'.

Be that as it may, by analysing how we come to have perceptual beliefs we see that the standard approach is mistaken. Dretske (1993, p. 333), as do many others, puts forward the standard account thus:

We cross intersections when we see the light turn green, head for the kitchen when we smell the roast burning, squeeze the fruit to determine its ripeness, and climb out of bed when we hear the alarm ring. In each case we come to know something—that the light has turned green, that the roast is burning, that the melon is overripe, and that it is time to get up—by some sensory means.

This cannot be correct. It would mean that we clock up beliefs at a phenomenal rate:

The alarm clock is ringing.  
 It's time to get up.  
 It is 7 a.m.  
 It is still dark.  
 My slippers are on the floor.  
 My slippers are brown.  
 The carpet is blue.

The point is not that we would acquire a large *finite* number of beliefs; it is that we would acquire an *unlimited* number of beliefs.

It should be noted that we can react to our perceptual environment without acquiring beliefs about it. For something to be a perceptual belief we must simultaneously be perceiving something and making a linguistically-formulated judgement about it. (Any delay makes it a belief based on memory.) Thus, having perceptual beliefs presupposes a knowledge of language and, thus, also having some testimonial beliefs as we cannot acquire a language without also acquiring some beliefs about the world.

## 4 What Artificial Intelligence can Teach us

Testimony was studied in AI in the 1960s by Abelson and Carroll (1965) and Colby and Smith (1969), but, after some interesting work, interest just fizzled out. Thagard (2005) and I reintroduced testimony into AI about ten years ago (Diller 2000a, 2000b, 2001 and 2005). (I expound the philosophical theory underlying my approach in a recent paper (Diller 2008).) The precise details of these various systems are not germane here. What is pertinent is that in all of them there are two distinct but interrelated components. The names given to these vary, but one deals with the reception or absorption of information while the other deals with the testing or criticism of beliefs with the aim of removing the false ones. The second component is needed as we cannot help but acquire false beliefs through testimony.

### A Requirements for a Theory of Testimony

An account of testimony must account for, at least, the following puzzling features of testimony:

- The way in which people respond to propositional information changes over time.
- Not everybody necessarily responds to the same piece of propositional information in the same way.
- We are recipients of propositional information before we are transmitters or originators of information.
- Perceptual knowledge presupposes testimonial knowledge.
- We cannot avoid acquiring false beliefs through testimony.

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