

TESTIMONY, SIMULATION, AND THE LIMITS OF INDUCTIVISM

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According to such theorists as Reid [18], Austin [2], Coady [4], and Burge [3], the justificatory basis of beliefs based on testimony is somehow *basic* or *sui generis*. Obviously, this position contrasts with the view that testimonial justification can be reduced to justification of some more basic kind. Thus, e.g., it conflicts with what we might call ‘piecemeal inductivism’, the view of testimonial justification that Hume sets out in his *Enquiry*:

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. [10, p. 113; cf. p. 111]

As an attempt to ground what we take to be the justifiedness of our testimonial beliefs, however, piecemeal inductivism is a non-starter. As Coady says, ‘it seems absurd to suggest that, individually, we have done anything like the amount of fieldwork that [Hume's view] requires’ [4, p. 82].

But is this a problem with inductivism *per se*? *Must* any version of inductivism fall prey to the objection that we simply haven’t, indeed can’t, do enough first-person report-fact checking to sustain the claim that testimony is generally reliable? One might think so. Coady [4], Schmitt [19], and Sosa [20], for example, all more or less *equate* inductivism with Hume's piecemeal approach. According to Jack Lyons, however, this is a mistake. In a recent paper,¹ Lyons suggests that the problem with Hume's view is not that it is inductivist, but that ‘it assumes that our [inductive] evidence for the reliability of testimony must come in the form of personally experiencing a

¹[15]. All pages numbers given in brackets are to this paper.

correlation between reports and facts' (p. 171). Whereas, Lyons argues, recent investigation of the source of our folk psychological beliefs not only suggests that this assumption is highly dubious, but points the way towards a new inductive justification for our testimonial beliefs.

According to Lyons, the real weakness of the Humean piecemeal approach is not that it is inductivist, but that it places an implausible restriction on the *kind* of evidence on which the relevant induction might be based: the only sort of evidence countenanced by the piecemeal inductivist 'is a simple correlation between utterances and the world, without any attempt to get inside the minds of the testifiers' (p. 171). Whereas,

...the folk, whose testimonial beliefs are in question here, are not behaviourists, and they (we) do not reason like behaviourists....

Thus, in accounting for the justification for our belief in the general reliability of testimony, it is implausible to think that simple fact-report correlations are the only kinds of evidence we bring to bear on the issue. (*Ibid.*)

What other kind(s) of evidence might be of relevance here? (Folk) *psychological* evidence, obviously! In particular, the following two folk psychological beliefs bear upon the issue of testimonial justification:

- (i) that people generally try to tell the truth (unless they have some motive to lie), and
- (ii) that people are generally competent with respect to believing the truth. Call these beliefs the Sincerity Principle and the Competence Principle[s], respectively. (*Ibid.*)

Lyons takes it to be 'fairly obvious' how the Sincerity and Competence Principles, should they be susceptible to inductive justification, provide evidence for the general reliability of testimony (p. 172). And, Lyons thinks, if a particular account of the origin of these beliefs – viz., the simulation

theory -- is correct, then they not only admit of but *have* inductive, non-testimonial justification.

Now, we needn't delve into the details of simulation theory here, as all that is required for Lyons' argument to go through is that the following *core idea* of simulation theory be correct:² we form beliefs about the mental states of others by using the very mechanisms by which *we* form beliefs ourselves; we do this by taking our own mental state production mechanisms 'off-line', 'feeding in' the relevant perceptual (e.g.) inputs, and simply introspecting the appropriate 'outputs'. What simulation thus understood enables is *the dramatic expansion of the inductive basis*: it gives us *a lot more* evidence for the general reliability of testimony than even the most diligent piecemeal inductivist could ever hope to obtain. More to the point, simulation theory gives us *lots* of evidence for the Sincerity and Competence Principles:

Given that I am justified in thinking that I am generally competent in my ability to form true beliefs, then the beliefs that I ascribe to people will be beliefs that I would ascribe to myself if my situation were similar to theirs, most of which, by hypothesis, I am justified in thinking are true. Given the ubiquity of such folk psychological beliefs, it seems clear that the inductive sample, at least for the *reliability of beliefs*, must be a great deal larger than [the piecemeal inductivist] supposes. (p. 173)

Mutatis mutandis, the same goes for the Sincerity Principle (see pp. 173-174). And given that 'it is fairly obvious how the Sincerity Principle and Competence Principle[s], if justified non-testimonially, provide evidence for the general reliability of testimony' (p. 172), it looks like Lyons'

²In fact, Lyons gives a brief sketch of how the chief rival of simulation theory, the 'theory theory', might also sustain his argument (pp. 176-177).

simulationist story enables us to entirely reduce testimonial to inductive justification.³

There are, of course, a number of possible worries one might have concerning the argument just outlined -- about whether/why *any* of the beliefs produced via simulation are justified, for example, or about whether Lyons isn't too blithe in dismissing the question of whether/why each of us is justified in regarding ourselves as satisfying (i) and (ii) [see, especially, p. 174, note 12]. Here, however, I want to set aside questions about the *soundness* of Lyons' argument. For I think that Lyons' argument -- indeed, any attempt to argue from the Sincerity and Competence Principles alone to the general reliability of testimony -- involves a *non sequitor*.⁴ Thus, even if it turns out that simulation theory is true and that simulation enables us to inductively (and non-testimonially) justify the Sincerity and Competence Principles, it simply does not follow that testimony is generally reliable or that we're justified in taking it to be such. For the Sincerity and Competence Principles don't tell us *anything* about what sorts of linguistic acts to expect on the part of others; *a fortiori* they should not lead us to expect people's statements to be more often true than false.

To see this, note that these Principles are *purely* psychological. Nor is this surprising. After all, simulation theory purports to be an account of the origin of our beliefs about others' mental

³In Fricker's [6] terms, then, Lyons' account promises a 'global' reduction of testimonial to inductive justification -- as it must if it is intended as a genuine improvement over Hume's view, e.g., and an answer to traditional non-reductivists.

⁴Lyons is not alone in representing (i) and (ii) as sufficient to establish GRT: Fricker [6, p. 398] and Audi [1, p. 136], for example, both seem to think this as well.

states. [Hence Lyons' being able to say that simulation 'does not require us to check reports, since it does not require the *existence* of reports' (p. 173).] But while testimony might be a semi-psychological phenomenon, is it a linguistic one as well. However, the simulationist's inductive argument for the general reliability of testimony invites us to *ignore this fact*: it invites us to assume that since we're justified in thinking that people's *psychologies* are broadly congenial to testimony's being reliable, we're justified in thinking that *it is*. However, to get from

(i) People generally try to tell the truth (unless they have some motive to lie) [=the Sincerity Principle],

and,

(ii) People are generally competent with respect to believing the truth [=the Competence Principle],

to

(GRT) Testimony is generally reliable,

we need a *principle of linguistic competence* -- call it 'PLC', for short. That is, we need to suppose (roughly) that people are pretty good at executing the linguistic performances that they intend. For it's nothing about *S*'s (credal) competence or his sincerity *per se* which entitles you to believe what he says. Rather, it is *his successfully communicating* certain of his beliefs to you -- or his making as if to do so -- that leads and entitles you to form a testimonial belief with the same (or similar) content. But as far as Lyons' account is concerned, *S* might be *lousy* at communicating his beliefs -- in fact, in spite of his sincere intentions and credal competence, he might *never* succeed in communicating his ideas successfully.

Notice that it's not open to the simulationist to say that because I am justified in regarding

myself as generally linguistically competent I can simulate that others are similarly competent and so induce PLC. For the simulation theory is an account of how we arrive at our beliefs about the *psychology* of others; but whether one is linguistically competent is more than a matter of one's mental states and/or belief-forming processes. (This is how the simulationist is able to establish (i) and (ii), but not say that others, like oneself, are generally pretty good at playing the piano.) And if one *could* arrive at PLC simply by simulation, one could on those same grounds simply simulate/induce that *GRT* is true!

So in getting from (i) and (ii) to GRT Lyons must simply be *assuming* that people are generally linguistically competent. And who could doubt that they are? I certainly don't. Not only, however, does the Lyons owe us an account of the justificatory basis of our belief in PLC that is consistent with the project of grounding testimonial justification in *induction*,⁵ there is reason for pessimism about the prospects for such an account's being given. For there is some reason to think that we cannot presume that others are linguistically competent *without presuming that what they say (generally) is true* [cf., e.g., Coady, 4], and thus that in presuming the former Lyons has taken for granted what his argument is meant to establish.

⁵This is why, in the present context, that others are linguistically competent is not 'an innocent assumption', one which does not need to be justified 'in the usual sense at all', as one anonymous referee has suggested. *I*, of course, take it to be such; but I am not attempting to reduce testimonial justification to inductive justification. If PLC is needed by Lyons, and if – as I go on to argue – PLC and GRT seem too closely bound up to be separable, then while innocent enough in ordinary contexts, the assumption of PLC is problematic *for Lyons*.

In a brief discussion note such as this, I cannot hope to do more than make a *prima facie* case for the claim just made. But note that we do typically count a speaker as gaining facility in a language just in case they become able to name objects and state (mostly) truths in it. In like manner, we adult speakers of a language routinely take it as evidence for someone's not knowing what a given term means that regarding them as linguistically competent – hence, viewing speaker and literal meaning as convergent -- would have them intending to communicate wild falsehoods or nonsense. Again, the moral is that as we ordinarily think of them linguistic competence and the ability to state truths are very closely bound up: in general, in order to take you to be linguistically competent it must be that what you say (largely) covaries with how (I think) things are.⁶

Notice that it is not being claimed that all utterances of falsehoods are in fact misuses, or that the only way to establish linguistic competence in particular cases is to regard what individual speakers say as largely true. Not at all: PLC says that *people in general* are pretty good at executing the linguistic performances, which they intend.⁷ (Lyons needs such a *general* principle if he's to get to the conclusion that testimony is *generally* reliable.) My claim is that, *understood as a general principle*, PLC isn't separable from GRT.

Of course, I could be wrong about this. But the salient point is that it's no problem for the present argument if, in certain cases, linguistic competence is not inferred from a given subject's speaking (mostly) truths. On the contrary, in order to (justifiedly) regard you as linguistically

⁶This way of putting the point is due to Peter J. Graham.

⁷Thus, I am arguing against the global reduction of testimonial to inductive justification, rather than the local variety [6]. (As noted previously, it is only if Lyons is attempting the former that his account is an alternative to Hume's, e.g., and opposes traditional anti-[global-]reductivist positions.)

competent, there is typically no need for you to say anything at all, much less for you to say something in a language I speak, much less for you say something that I not only understand but regard as true. Rather, seeing you silently regarding a newspaper, e.g., I ordinarily simply *presume* that you're linguistically competent.⁸ Part of what justifies me in this presumption, however, is the fact that you look no different from all those people with whom I've been able to have linguistic interchanges. And the present claim is that when we consider the class of people with whom we're able to have linguistic exchanges, there is simply no separating their general linguistic competence from their general ability to speak truths. So it is not surprising if, in the individual case, a manifest inability to come up with some statements which are (not just well-formed) but *true* leads me to doubt – and justifiedly so -- whether you are linguistically competent after all.⁹

Again, the foregoing is at best a presumptive argument for the inseparability of PLC and GRT. But it should be noted that such an inseparability is suggested by many going theories of the nature of (thought and) language. (Here, I can only mention a few.) Thus, a constitutive connection

⁸This example is due to Saul Traiger.

⁹But so long as you are not atypical in this way, when you do occasionally misuse a word (perhaps with the result that what you actually *say* is strictly speaking false, even obviously so), I will have no trouble calculating what you *meant* to communicate and take your deviant utterance as reliable testimony as to the truth of what was meant. (Thanks here to an anonymous referee.) What I deny is that this sort of phenomenon could be the rule, rather than the exception: determining speaker meaning takes place against the background of (some) shared linguistic meanings and speakers' *general* (though imperfect, of course) ability to say what they mean.

between linguistic competence and the ability to state (mostly) truths is suggested by the principle of charity (and Grandy's 'principle of humanity' plus the Sincerity and Competence Principles) [5, 17, 21]; by Grice's Maxim of Quality [8], together with the thought that regularities in speakers' intentions fix literal meanings [7]; by Lewis' convention of truthfulness and trust (in *L*) [11, 12]; by Lewis' 'Rules of Accommodation' [13]; by the causal theory of reference [see, e.g., 16]; and by the rather pedestrian thought that a language wouldn't serve its purpose of enabling the conveyance of information, and so would not persist, unless many of the ostensible reports therein were reliable [18, e.g.].

On each of the foregoing lines of thought, there is an intimate connection between a language (and/or the having/usage thereof) and reliable speech.¹⁰ So if you find any of these claims/positions the least bit plausible – more generally, if you find yourself at least somewhat sympathetic to the arguments and considerations presented here -- you ought to find it plausible that the burden is on Lyons to say something about why in assuming PLC he has not simply presupposed what the simulationist/inductivist argument is meant to establish.¹¹

¹⁰Granted, not all of these render the connection between GRT and PLC strictly *necessary* (cf. pp. 165-167). But the existence of worlds in which PLC and GRT come apart won't in itself help the inductivist if he is trying to give an account of the justificatory basis of *our* testimony-based beliefs.

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