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Why Take Our Word For It?

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“Say you’re wrong?”

“Sir, I’ll stake my reputation on it.”

“Kryten, you haven’t got a reputation.”

“No, but I’m hoping to acquire one from this escapade.”

– Rimmer & Kryten, *Red Dwarf*

I. Introduction

We find out a lot about the world through people telling us things. And we can (and do) come to know many of these things that people tell us, without running background checks to make sure that the tellers are reliable (in the sense that they are likely to know what they are talking about), or trustworthy (in the sense that they are likely to tell us what they know, rather than just whatever is easiest to say, or whatever would be most convenient to have us believe on that occasion). Believing what others say, as we do in testimony, seems a lot riskier than trusting our senses, for instance. Yet, we would know much less than we ordinarily take ourselves to know if we didn’t regularly form beliefs on the basis of testimony. The problem, then, is to explain how this can be, that is, how we can come to know things through people telling us, given that we don’t go to the trouble of making sure that the tellers are reliable and trustworthy.

You might suppose that all that is needed for a hearer to acquire knowledge via testimony is that the teller say something true, and that he be, as a matter of fact, reliable and trustworthy, at least about the topic at hand. But even most reliabilists are unlikely to think that any old *de facto* reliable process is sufficient to yield knowledge. Suppose we go to a garage sale, where we buy an old barometer. It would be foolhardy for us to believe the reading on the barometer without checking whether it is still working. Likewise if we come across a poster in an art gallery that says, “Someone called ‘Andy’ thought he was the last man on Earth.” Again,

even if this is true, it would take more investigation for us to come to know this. (We might at least need some reason to believe that the poster is a genuine assertion, or have some inkling about the purpose of the artwork, or some idea about the reliability of posters in the gallery, or *something*.) Even if, unbeknownst to us, the barometer is working when we buy it from the garage sale, and the poster is a genuine assertion that has been thoroughly fact-checked (as have all the other posters in the gallery, by the reliable but neurotic gallery owner), if we have no reason to think these things, we do not count as coming to know something in either of these cases, both intuitively, and according to even the typical reliabilist.

By contrast, if we hear a morning radio announcer say that the atmospheric pressure is low at the moment, or someone at a party tells us that they have heard of mental patients who think they are the last beings on earth, and relates an anecdote about one named 'Andy', we can come to know that the atmospheric pressure is low, or that someone called 'Andy' thought he was the last man on earth, without going to the trouble of checking the reliability of the announcer or the party-goer. This seems to set testimony apart from other potential sources of knowledge, such as the barometer and the poster. Then, the problem becomes this: what is special about testimony as a source of knowledge?

Some philosophers have thought that what is special about testimony is that it is *interpersonal*, that it occurs in the context of interpersonal beliefs and expectations (though sometimes these are attitudes towards mere acquaintances, or people with whom we are not even acquainted, such as people in the media). On such views, these interpersonal relationships provide some extra element that is part of the explanation of how testimony yields knowledge. Somehow, it is this extra element that sets testimony apart from dubious measuring equipment and puzzling artworks. Therefore, according to such views, the focus of the epistemology of testimony should be on such interpersonal relationships, and how they function in testimony.

Intuitively, there is something attractive about the idea that interpersonal relationships matter in testimony. We do learn much of what we know from those to whom we bear close interpersonal relationships, such as parents and friends. Moreover, we are more likely to take

ourselves to know things that we have been told by those to whom we bear such relations, at least with respect to some topics. For example, we are far more likely to take ourselves to know that Canberra has the highest median income among major cities in Australia if told this by a friend rather than by someone proclaiming from a soapbox in the park. If interpersonal relationships matter in testimony, perhaps some explanation of these intuitions will be forthcoming.

The question, then, is this: how do interpersonal relationships matter in testimony? Slightly more precisely, what is it about the fact that testimony occurs in interpersonal contexts that helps explain how hearers can come to derive epistemic warrant from testimony? According to one view of testimony – namely, the Assurance View – testifiers *give their word* that what they say is true, and hearers come to derive epistemic warrant by *taking their word* on the matter. (We shall have much more to say in what follows about what ‘giving one’s word’ and ‘taking someone’s word’ mean in this context.) Defenders of this view include Angus Ross, Richard Moran, and Edward Hinchman, though some version of this view may also be found in J.L. Austin (Ross 1986, Moran 2005, Hinchman 2005, Austin 1961). Importantly, on this view, the epistemic warrant offered by testimony is *non-evidential* in nature. According to an alternate view – the Staking View, which we defend in this paper – testifiers stake their reputations as testifiers on what they say being true, and hearers come to derive epistemic warrant from perceiving this staking. On this view, the epistemic warrant offered by testimony is entirely evidential in nature. But as we shall see, on both views, interpersonal relationships are crucial to the derivation of epistemic warrant (and knowledge) from testimony.

The Staking View does not purport to describe the only route via which testimony can provide hearers with evidence for what is testified. There are all sorts of other routes as well, from self-fulfilling claims (“Someone is speaking now”), to naïve induction (for ten years of observations, whenever the old man said rain was coming, rain arrived), to other more interesting evidential routes, some of which we will mention in passing. But we claim that our account offers an explanation for many of the core uses of testimony as evidence. In addition,

the Staking View captures what is distinctive about testimony as a source of knowledge (as compared to other sources like memory and perception), and thus provides at least a partial answer to the question about what is special about testimony. Almost any source of knowledge can provide inductive evidence in the manner described above, for example, but not every source makes use of the pattern of interpersonal expectations and interactions in the way that testimony does.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section (§II), we examine three versions of the Assurance View, and describe some of the motivations shared by proponents of this view. In §III, we present some objections to the versions of the Assurance View presented in §II. Next, in §IV, we describe the alternate view, namely, the Staking View. We argue that this view can also accommodate many of the motivations driving the assurance theorists, but that it is not susceptible to the difficulties that beset the Assurance View. Then, in §V, we consider and respond to some further possible objections to the Staking View. Finally, in §VI, we conclude by briefly highlighting the relationship between tellings, as understood by the Staking View, and (other) rational actions.

II. The Assurance View

Proponents of the Assurance View begin with the following observation. In paradigmatic cases of testimony, the act of testifying (or telling) is undertaken voluntarily and intentionally. This is not to deny that testimony can sometimes be coerced, as when the testifier is subpoenaed to appear in court. But that is not the ordinary case. However, assurance theorists suggest that this observation – that telling is paradigmatically voluntary and intentional – is in tension with the idea that the testifier's utterance serves as evidence for what he says. After all, in other cases, finding out that a supposed piece of evidence has been voluntarily and intentionally produced will tend to offer reason to doubt that it is genuinely evidence. Therefore, assurance

theorists argue, it is at best puzzling how testimony can serve as evidence for the truth of what is being testified.¹

Consider again the barometer. If we have reason to believe that it is functioning properly, we have evidence that the atmospheric pressure is as it says it is. But if we then find out that the barometer is in fact being controlled by someone – e.g., that the barometer ‘readings’ are being manually entered by him – then it is no longer clear whether we still have this evidence. At best, we now need to take into account what the individual controlling the barometer is up to, what his motives and intentions are. Thus, the recognition that the ‘readings’ are presented voluntarily and intentionally seems to undercut their status as evidence. Similarly, according to the assurance theorists, once we recognize that acts of telling are also voluntary and intentional, we seem to have a related problem about the evidential status of testimony:

If speech is seen as a form of *evidence*, then once its intentional character is recognized (that is, not just as intentional behavior, but intentional with respect to inducing a particular belief), we need an account of how it could count as anything more than *doctored* evidence (Moran 2005, 6, original emphasis).²

¹ In our discussion from now on, except where otherwise noted, we will focus on paradigmatic cases of telling, i.e., cases that are both intentional and voluntary. Thus, we will implicitly exclude slips of the tongue, utterances at gunpoint, and the like from our generalizations about tellings.

² In a similar vein, Ross writes: “The main problem with the idea that the hearer views the speaker’s words as evidence arises from the fact that, unlike the examples of natural signs which spring most readily to mind, saying something is a deliberate act under the speaker’s conscious control and the hearer is aware that this is the case” (Ross 1986, 72).

Unlike Ross and Moran, Hinchman does not explicitly derive the non-evidential nature of the epistemic warrant provided by testimony from the voluntary and intentional character of acts of telling. Nevertheless, Hinchman also believes that this epistemic warrant is non-evidential.

Given this apparent tension between the voluntary and intentional character of acts of telling, and their status as evidence, assurance theorists conclude that such acts are not best viewed as attempts to provide hearers with evidence. Rather, on their view, we should prefer an alternate explanation of how tellings provide us with epistemic warrant.

What, then, is the alternate explanation? Let's begin with Ross. On his view, a teller, in testifying to something, offers his hearer a *guarantee* that what he has said is true (Ross 1986). In offering this guarantee, the teller takes on responsibility for the truth of what he is saying, and in doing so, offers his hearer *prima facie* epistemic warrant for the relevant belief. (The warrant is only *prima facie* because it can be defeated.) The hearer can acquire this epistemic warrant by accepting the teller's guarantee. Moran offers a very similar characterization (Moran 2005). According to him, a teller offers his hearer his *assurance* that what he has said is true. (Like Ross, Moran also sometimes talks about tellers offering *guarantees*, rather than assurances (Moran 2005, 11).) In testifying, the teller presents himself as accountable for the truth of what he says, and in doing so, *confers* epistemic value on his words. Again, the hearer can acquire *prima facie* epistemic warrant for the testimony-based belief by accepting the teller's assurance.

It is worth highlighting a crucial feature of similarity between these accounts. Suppose Dean tells Irene, "There was a cockatoo on my balcony this morning." As a result, Irene comes to believe that there was a cockatoo on Dean's balcony this morning. According to both Ross and Moran, in testifying to this, Dean assumes (at least partial) epistemic responsibility for the belief Irene thereby acquires. Moreover, it is *because* he assumes part of the epistemic burden in this manner – and *not* because his utterance constitutes evidence that there was a cockatoo on his balcony this morning – that his testimony provides epistemic warrant for her belief. By contrast, if both Dean and Irene had been standing on the balcony this morning, and Dean had merely drawn Irene's attention to the cockatoo by pointing, she might have acquired the same belief. But in that case, since she would not have been relying upon him for epistemic warrant (but instead would have depended on her senses), he would not be epistemically responsible for her belief. The sharing of epistemic responsibility, then, is the key element that

distinguishes testimony as a source of epistemic warrant (and knowledge) from other sources, like perception.

A similar picture emerges on Hinchman's account of testimony (Hinchman 2005). On his view, when testifying, a teller extends to his hearer an invitation to trust him that what he says is true. If the hearer accepts the invitation, he thereby acquires *prima facie* epistemic warrant for the belief based upon the teller's testimony. Like Ross and Moran, Hinchman also thinks that tellers take on some of the epistemic responsibility for the beliefs their hearers form on the basis of their testimony.

One of the attractions of this picture, according to Hinchman, is that it can explain why a teller is entitled to feel "slighted" if his intended hearer fails to regard himself as having gained even *prima facie* warrant from the teller's testimony, but not similarly entitled to feel slighted if someone who merely overhears his testimony reacts in the same way (Hinchman 2005, 565). The intended hearer's failure to regard himself as acquiring warrant constitutes a rejection of the invitation extended to him by the teller. By contrast, since no such invitation is extended to the overhearer, the latter's reaction does not constitute any slight.

In sum: assurance theorists begin with the observation that the voluntary and intentional character of acts of telling seems to undercut their status as evidence. They take this to be reason to suppose that the epistemic warrant provided by testimony is non-evidential in character. Instead, assurance theorists suggest that testimony provides epistemic warrant because tellers assume (part of the) epistemic responsibility for beliefs their hearers form on the basis of their testimony. A teller assumes such responsibility by offering a guarantee of the truth of what he says (Ross), or by offering some assurance of this (Moran), or by inviting his intended hearer to trust him that what he says is true (Hinchman). If the hearer accepts the guarantee, assurance, or invitation, he thereby acquires epistemic warrant for the relevant belief. On each of these views, the fact that tellings are intentional and voluntary is part of the explanation of their epistemic value (rather than in tension with that value), for guarantees,

assurances, and invitations to trust are all more felicitous when intentionally and voluntarily offered.

In many respects, the Assurance View offers an attractive picture of how testimony works. In particular, this view fully accommodates the intuition that interpersonal relationships matter in testimony. Recall the idea, mentioned in the Introduction, that we are more likely to regard ourselves as having epistemic warrant for some things (e.g., that Canberra has the highest median income among major cities in Australia) when told to us by friends than by passersby on the street. Each version of the Assurance View discussed in this section bears out this idea, for *ceteris paribus* we are more likely to accept guarantees, or assurances, or invitations to trust, from friends than from those we do not know at all. In fact, each version of the Assurance View places some type of interpersonal relationship – e.g., a trusting relationship, or a relationship based on giving and accepting assurances – at the center of the epistemology of testimony.

Nevertheless, in spite of these attractions, the Assurance View has several problems. To these we turn next.

III. Problems for the Assurance View

In this section, we present five objections to the Assurance View. The first pair of objections bear on some versions of the view, but not others. The remaining three objections apply to all versions of the view.

First, it will sound odd to some that acts of telling provide epistemic warrant by providing *guarantees*. Suppose Irene tells Dean that the median income will be higher in Canberra than in Sydney next year. Has she thereby offered a guarantee that this will be the case? It is not as though she has any control over the truth of what she says, nor would she set out to try to ensure its truth. If guarantees are infelicitous when the guarantor has no control over what is guaranteed, many tellings would be infelicitous. And the sort of complaint we offer to people who have told us falsehoods does not seem to match the sort of complaint that

follows a failed guarantee. Suppose someone tells us that house prices are due to rise in our neighbourhood, but this turns out to be an error. While we can perhaps complain about being misled, the sort of complaint we might have made if the teller had *guaranteed* that house prices were due to rise does not seem available here.

This point is intended in the first place against Ross's view of testimony. But it might tell against Moran's view as well. Like Ross, Moran sometimes characterizes tellings as involving offers of guarantees. Elsewhere, Moran also compares tellings to promisings. But promises may well share some felicity conditions with guarantees. If, for example, Irene were to say to Dean, "I promise you that the median income will be higher in Canberra than in Sydney next year," it would be tempting to read this as something other than a genuine promise, precisely because differences in incomes between Australian cities is not under Irene's control. This temptation can be explained if we suppose that promising that something will be the case is felicitous only when its being the case is up to the promisor (or under her control) in some relevant sense.

Next, let us turn to Hinchman's view. Suppose Dean tells Irene, "Redback spiders are very common in this area." Unbeknownst to them, Aaron is eavesdropping on their conversation. According to Hinchman, in telling Irene this, Dean extends to her an invitation to trust him that what he says is true. But since Dean does not know that Aaron is eavesdropping, he does not extend a similar invitation to him as well. (In fact, we can imagine that Dean doesn't like Aaron very much, and that he would not want him to be warned about the prevalence of redbacks in their locality.) Nevertheless, it seems that Irene and Aaron acquire the same *prima facie* epistemic warrant for the belief that redback spiders are very common in their area from Dean's testimony. Hinchman's account cannot accommodate this.³

Depending on how the details of Ross's and Moran's accounts are spelled out, a similar point might be made against them as well. If, on their views, a teller offers a guarantee (or

³ See also Jennifer Lackey's discussion of eavesdropping cases (Lackey 2008, 233-8).

assurance) of the truth of what he testifies only to his intended hearer(s), unexpected (and unwanted) eavesdroppers will create a problem for their accounts also. If, on the other hand, a teller offers the guarantee (assurance) to anyone who hears him, then this problem does not arise for Ross and Moran. Note, however, that Hinchman would not avail himself of the analogous move (i.e., allow that tellers extend invitations to trust to everyone who hears them), for he takes it to be an *advantage* of his position that it can explain why tellers react differently to similar attitudes on the parts of intended hearers and accidental overhearers (such as Aaron). This explanation relies on the hypothesis that tellers do not extend invitations to trust to those who merely happen to overhear their testimony.

Third, consider how we ordinarily react to someone giving us false testimony. Suppose Betsy tells Irene that a particular road (the Goulburn Road) off the main highway from Canberra to Sydney is a shortcut that shaves twenty minutes off that trip. Later, when Dean and Irene are making this trip, Irene tells Dean (the driver) that the Goulburn Road is a shortcut. They take the supposed shortcut, end up hopelessly lost, and cannot find their way back to either the main highway or Sydney. Dean criticizes Irene for giving him false information. Now, compare the following two replies that Irene might make to this criticism: (a) "But Betsy told me that this was a shortcut"; or, (b) "But Betsy told me that this was a shortcut, and she has always given me good directions in the past." Suppose here that Dean knows nothing about Betsy, and has no reason to trust her. Then, (a) by itself seems a non-starter as a defense, while (b) seems much superior. (In particular, it would be reasonable for Dean to complain that Irene shouldn't believe everything she is told in response to (a), but not in response to (b).) But if, in testifying about the shortcut, Betsy incurs some of the epistemic responsibility for Irene's resulting belief, then it is not clear why (a) should seem so inadequate. After all, if Betsy does incur epistemic responsibility, then (a) should serve to deflect some of Dean's resentment from Irene to Betsy, and so, serve as a partial defense for Irene. But that does not seem to be in keeping with our ordinary practices in such matters.

Some assurance theorists might reply that (a) fails as a defense because tellers cannot assume epistemic responsibility at will. For example, Moran writes:

For the speaker to be able to [assume epistemic responsibility in a telling] it must be assumed by both parties that the speaker does indeed satisfy the right conditions for such an act (e.g., that he possesses the relevant knowledge, trustworthiness, and reliability) (Moran 2005, 16).

Thus, Moran might suggest that (a) is a non-starter as a defense for Irene because it does not convey the information that the teller (Betsy) satisfies the relevant conditions, i.e., that she is assumed (by both herself and Irene) to be knowledgeable about directions, trustworthy, etc. But this response raises a further question, namely, whether in order for an act to count as a telling at all, the speaker must *succeed* in assuming epistemic responsibility for the corresponding belief. If the answer is “yes”, then it follows that Betsy’s act counts as a telling only if the relevant conditions (regarding Betsy being assumed to be knowledgeable, trustworthy, etc.) are satisfied. Therefore, when Irene reports Betsy as having *told* her something, she (Irene) thereby reports that Betsy has satisfied the relevant conditions. So, (a) does convey the information that Betsy satisfies these conditions. On the other hand, if the answer is “no”, then there are tellings which do not provide even *prima facie* epistemic warrant for what is testified. Perhaps the assurance theorists would be willing to say this about some atypical tellings, such as coerced tellings. But Betsy’s act of giving directions is surely not atypical in any relevant sense, nor does Dean have any reason to suspect that it is atypical in any relevant sense. Absent such atypicality (or reason to suspect such atypicality), (a) seems to convey the information that Betsy satisfies the relevant conditions. Thus, it remains unclear why (a) is a non-starter as a defense, while (b) is not.

Perhaps the assurance theorists could complain that while Irene is not entirely epistemically responsible for her own belief in this case, she *is* epistemically responsible for Dean’s, and therefore, Dean has a cause for resentment against her that she cannot deflect onto Betty. But there are other situations in which Dean will hold Irene (rather than Betty) entirely

responsible for Irene's beliefs, even if Irene doesn't cause *Dean* to also have false beliefs. If, instead of giving bad advice, Irene had been driving, and had made an unwise turn that got them hopelessly lost, Dean might again have cause to complain. If Irene then protests that Betty told her the turn was the right one to make, Dean is again unlikely to be mollified if neither he nor Irene have any special reason to believe that Betty is likely to be right. When Irene acts on a belief, others will hold her entirely responsible if the belief turns out to be mistaken and unwarranted, even if that belief was based on testimony. At least that seems to best describe what in fact happens to us in such situations.

Here is a fourth concern about the Assurance View. Sometimes we have to weigh up what to believe when testimony conflicts with perceptual evidence, or evidence of other kinds. Suppose Dean and Irene are hill walking, and a route that looks unpromising to them from the bottom of the hill is one that Betsy has assured them is the best way to the top. Let us grant that if they end up deciding that Betsy's way is the one to take, she stands (at least partially) epistemically responsible for their belief. Still, when it comes down to it, they have to form beliefs, and act accordingly. What is the best thing for them to believe (in the sense of the most rational, or the best justified epistemically)? A good first pass at the answer is whichever belief is supported by the best evidence. Does that answer work here? On the Assurance View, Betsy's testimony provides Dean and Irene with warrant that is non-evidential in character. Does that mean that the first pass answer fails, because one of the relevant sources of warrant in this case is non-evidential? Call the route Betsy recommends *B*. Perhaps the assurance theorists would reply that the first pass answer can be rescued by balancing *Betsy's* evidence for *B* being the best route against the perceptual evidence available to Dean and Irene. But this raises further questions. If Betsy's evidence for *B* being the best route was in fact stronger than the perceptual evidence available to Dean and Irene (which suggests that *B* is not the best route), is that enough to make believing Betsy the best thing to do here? Or can they do the rationally correct thing by disbelieving Betsy in this case (e.g., because they have no way of knowing how good her evidence was, or because she was wrong about the Goulburn Road)?

Our objection is not that the Assurance View gives the wrong answer to these questions. It is that its proponents have not yet offered answers to these questions at all. Holding that others can assume epistemic responsibility for our beliefs is all well and good, but others cannot come to believe for us, nor perform actions for us. When it comes to the rationality of our beliefs and actions, the reasons others have to believe or act if they were in our place seems only derivatively relevant. If that is not the case, as Hinchman and Moran seem to suggest (Hinchman more clearly than Moran), then we need a story about how this is reflected in what it is rational for an individual to believe (and do), and ideally a story as comprehensive as the usual accounts of what one should believe (and do) when confronted with conflicting bits of evidence. We need to know what Dean and Irene should believe in light of what Betsy has told them, combined with their own impression of the hill in front of them. We suggest that such a story will not be entirely straightforward. One complication is that, even if Dean and Irene decide to trust Betsy on this occasion, it is not clear whether they should assign the same weight to Betsy's testimony as she should assign to her own source of evidence. This worry becomes especially pressing if, for example, they are unaware that Betsy's source is especially strong, or have reason to think that the source is much weaker than it actually is. A further complication is that the story might have to depend upon whether Dean and Irene have reason to think that Betsy is not perfectly reliable (e.g., if they are aware of some recent salient failures in the truth of her testimony). A story that addresses all such complications is needed for the Assurance View to be satisfactory.

Finally, recall the problem with which we started the paper, namely, the problem of explaining how testimony can yield knowledge. How, we might ask, can a guarantee (or assurance, or invitation to trust) that what is said is true be sufficient for knowledge? Suppose that Dean offers Irene a guarantee (assurance, invitation to trust him) that that tree is a scribbly gum. On the one hand, if she has ample evidence available to her that he knows nothing about trees, it seems that she does not come to know that that tree is a scribbly gum. Guarantees (assurances, invitations to trust) from ignorant or unreliable sources, even when accepted,

cannot be sufficient for knowledge. On the other hand, if she has evidence that Dean is knowledgeable and reliable on the topic of trees, then any guarantee (assurance, invitation to trust) that he offers seems superfluous: he can just say it, and Irene's evidence that he is knowledgeable and reliable will do the rest. Either way, it looks like the guarantee (assurance, invitation to trust) is not doing any work in securing knowledge.⁴

We hope that the discussion above is sufficient to establish that the Assurance View faces a host of difficulties. Instead of cataloguing further problems for the view, we want to turn now to our positive view, which (we argue) accommodates much of what motivates assurance theorists, while avoiding the difficulties mentioned above.

IV. The Staking View

When others tell us things, we often rely upon what we know about the tellers to decide whether we should believe what we have been told. Suppose again that Dean tells Irene that that tree is a scribbly gum. If she knows that he has been frequently wrong in the past when trying to identify trees, she is unlikely to believe him this time. If, on the other hand, she knows that he has a long and perfect track record with respect to tree identification, she is far more likely to believe him. In both cases, her behavior would be in keeping with our ordinary testimonial practices.

Next, consider the same situation from the point of view of the teller, i.e., from Dean's point of view. He knows that hearers are more likely to believe tellers who have a history of getting things right, and less likely to believe tellers who have a history of getting things wrong. So, he knows that if he chooses to testify on this occasion, whether he gets things right will affect how likely his hearer is to believe him (at least on related topics) the next time he testifies. That is to say, he knows that when he testifies, he *stakes his reputation as a teller*. If he gets things right, that enhances his reputation. If he doesn't, that detracts from his reputation. Insofar as

⁴ Lackey makes a similar point (Lackey 2008, 238).

he has an interest in getting his hearer to believe what he says not just this time, but on future occasions as well, he has reason to make sure that he gets things right when he testifies now. Therefore, if he chooses to testify, the fact that he has so chosen itself constitutes (some) evidence for the truth of what he says. This is the Staking View.

On this picture, whenever a teller testifies, he stakes his reputation as a testifier. How much he stakes on a particular occasion depends upon the nature of his relationship with his intended audience. If he is testifying to someone with whom he will have an enduring relationship long into the future (e.g., a close friend), he has a strong interest in maintaining a good reputation as a testifier. If, however, he is testifying to someone he will not see often (e.g., an occasional acquaintance), he has a much weaker interest in maintaining such a reputation. Because he has a greater interest in establishing and maintaining his reputation as a testifier on the first occasion, he has more at stake when testifying on that occasion than on the second. And because he has more at stake, his testifying constitutes better evidence for the truth of what he testifies on the first occasion than on the second.

Indeed, a speaker has several sorts of reputation to maintain when testifying, each of which contributes to a reputation for producing good testimony. There is a reputation for honesty: one can be honest and wrong, or assert the truth but be dishonest. But even given honesty, there are good testifiers and bad: someone can be honest and constantly be saying false things, of course, if he has false beliefs about the things he talks about. A testifier can also be careful or careless: a testifier who gets things right, but who is later shown to have had no good reason or evidence for his testimony, is likely to suffer a serious loss of reputation as a good testifier. Careless testifiers are typically not reliable or trustworthy, even if they have asserted the truth on particular occasions before. We do not need to distinguish the different kinds of reputation as a testifier in any detail here.

The Staking View leaves it open that there are many sorts of evidence available to hearers upon which they can (and should) base their decisions about whether to believe what they are told. For instance, the hearer may rely upon evidence regarding the teller's general

reliability, trustworthiness, and so on. The Staking View does not deny any of this. Rather, it points out that, in addition to these factors, the hearer has available an additional bit of evidence, constituted by the fact that the teller has chosen to testify in the first place. As we shall see below, this aspect of testimony helps explain some of the core uses of testimony as evidence, as well as some of what is distinctive about testimony as a source of warrant (and knowledge).

On any particular occasion, the evidence constituted by the fact that the teller has chosen to testify may be outweighed by conflicting evidence, including evidence about various motives that might be driving the teller to testify. Few (if any) sorts of evidence are incorrigible, and testimony is no exception.

It might help here to compare the act of telling, as characterized by the Staking View, with the act of placing a bet. Suppose Irene is wondering whether it will rain tomorrow, and she finds out that Dean has placed a bet on its raining tomorrow. As a result of this bet, he stands to lose some amount of money if it doesn't rain tomorrow, and to gain some amount if it does rain. Insofar as he has an interest in gaining rather than losing money, he also has an interest in ascertaining that it will rain tomorrow before placing the bet. Therefore, the fact that he has chosen to place the bet is some evidence that it will rain tomorrow. Note that the existence and availability of this evidence in no way depends on whether Irene trusts Dean. Moreover, the more money he stands to lose (or gain) in the bet, the greater his interest in getting things right, and thus, the better the evidence provided by his placing the bet.

Preferably, the Staking View should have something to say about why we value our reputations as testifiers, since it should only matter to us that someone is staking their reputation if we have good reason to think that their reputation is valuable to them. There may be all sorts of reasons in practice: it may be an unreflective evaluation drummed into us by our parents; or we might value a reputation as a reliable testifier as part of a more general reputation for being useful; or we might notice that those around us hate or despise bad testifiers, and want to avoid the opprobrium. But in addition to these, there is a further good

general reason for us to value our reputations as testifiers. One of the main reasons we tell people things is to get them to believe what we tell them. Needless to say, this is useful for all sorts of reasons. It often helps us get what we want if the right people believe the right things; it helps those we care about get what they want if they believe the right things; and, if we do someone a good turn by telling them something true and useful, they may well return the favour, and so on. But people are far more likely to believe us if we have reputations for being honest, careful, and for getting things right, that is, if we have reputations for being good testifiers. The fable of the boy who cried “Wolf!” reminds us that it can be very inconvenient to lose one’s reputation as a testifier. So we can see why we would expect most of our interlocutors to be motivated to not needlessly endanger their reputations. We think it is an advantage of the Staking View that these commonplace observations about testimony are integrated into the theory of testimony’s value, and not left as disconnected add-ons.

In the remainder of this section, we will point out some important consequences of the Staking View, as well as its points of similarity and difference with respect to the Assurance View. We hope that this discussion will make clear the commitments of the Staking View.

First, according to the Staking View, a teller has more at stake when testifying to a close friend than to a random passerby on the street, because he has a greater interest in establishing and maintaining a reputation as a good testifier with respect to the friend than with respect to the passerby. Because he has more at stake in testifying to the friend, his choosing to testify in that case constitutes better evidence for what he says than his choosing to testify to the acquaintance. Therefore, the Staking View can explain why we are more likely to take ourselves to know what we are told by friends than by passersby.

Second, tellers sometimes utter exhortations that are, on the face of it, hard to explain. For instance, Irene might say, “Take my word for it, Vegemite is icky,” or “Trust me on this, you should avoid Vegemite.” The Staking View can explain the point of such exhortations. On this view, whenever a teller testifies, she stakes her reputation as a teller. But sometimes, when it is particularly important to her that she be believed, she will be willing to stake more of her

reputation than she otherwise would in such situations, in the hopes of securing her hearer's belief. The exhortations mentioned above – 'take my word for it', 'trust me on this', and their ilk – can be understood as devices for indicating this willingness. By uttering such an exhortation, Irene offers to undergo a significant harm to her reputation if she gets things wrong. Since she therefore has a greater interest in getting things right than she otherwise would, her choosing to testify constitutes *better* evidence for the truth of what she has said than if she had not added the exhortation.

Third, we are sometimes more suspicious of what others tell us if the tellers wish to remain anonymous, than if they are prepared to identify themselves and be held accountable for their testimony to a wide range of people. For example, a quote in a news story attributed to an anonymous source is likely to be treated with more caution by the news-reading public than one to which a public figure is willing to put her name. Similarly, a comment left anonymously on an internet message board is less likely to be believed than one left by a commenter willing to attach a name (even a pseudonym). This sort of thing can easily be explained on the Staking View. When a testifier is unwilling to go public as a source for a claim, she takes much less of a risk of damaging her reputation than if her status as source were widely broadcast. Because she takes less of a risk, her testimony constitutes less good evidence for the truth of what she says. By contrast, as far as we can tell, an explanation of this phenomenon is not at all straightforward on the Assurance View. Why should it matter whether an assumption of epistemic responsibility is off the record or not?

Fourth, the Staking View recognizes that tellings are voluntary and intentional acts, and further, that this feature of tellings is crucial to the way in which testimony yields epistemic warrant. It is precisely because tellers can choose whether to testify that their acts of telling constitute evidence in the manner described by the Staking View. By contrast, if a speaker is coerced into speaking (e.g., under threat of a gun), or speaks unintentionally (e.g., in his sleep), he is not guided in his choice of what to say by his interest in preserving his reputation as a testifier. In the former case, he may well not care *what* he says, as long as whatever he says

removes the threat; in the latter case, he does not choose his words at all. Therefore, in both cases, he does not stake his reputation as a testifier. (Compare these cases with someone being forced to place a bet, and someone placing a bet by accident, respectively. Since such bets are not guided by the bettors' interest in maximizing their profits, it would be a mistake to regard this betting behavior as evidence for the truth of the propositions on which the bets are placed.)

The Staking View thus agrees with the Assurance View that the voluntary and intentional character of acts of telling is part of the explanation of their epistemic value. Unlike the Assurance View, however, the Staking View holds that the epistemic warrant provided by testimony is entirely evidential in nature. In fact, whereas assurance theorists worry that the voluntary and intentional character of tellings undercuts their status as evidence, the Staking View shows how the very same aspect of tellings provides a kind of evidence that would not be available otherwise.

Fifth, the Staking View offers a partial answer to the question about what makes testimony special as a source of epistemic warrant. Compare testimony with memory. Whereas we choose what we tell others, we generally cannot choose what we remember. (Perhaps we can choose *whether* to remember, but that is not enough to make memory similar to testimony in the relevant respect.) *A fortiori*, the epistemic agent does not (and cannot) guide his choices about what to remember by his interest in maintaining his reputation as a good rememberer. Therefore, in memory, unlike in testimony, there is nothing like an epistemic agent staking his reputation, and so, no evidence constituted by such staking of reputation. Similar considerations apply to other sources of epistemic warrant, such as perception.⁵

Once again, then, the Staking View agrees with the Assurance View that testimony is distinctive as a source of epistemic warrant (at least as compared to memory, perception, and

⁵ Of course, the Staking View assimilates testimonial warrant to the kind of warrant that one gets from observing certain rational actions, such as placing a bet. Thus, the Staking View does not distinguish testimony from *all* other sources of epistemic warrant.

the like), and further, that this distinctiveness is partly explained by the fact that tellings are intentional and voluntary acts. Unlike the Assurance View, however, the Staking View denies that explaining the difference between testimony and the other sources of epistemic warrant mentioned above requires the supposition that testimony is not a source of evidence. (This point is really a corollary of the fourth point above.)

Finally, the Staking View does not encounter the problems that were raised for the Assurance View in the previous section. Whereas some versions of the Assurance View raise the worry that many tellings will turn out to be infelicitous because it is infelicitous for a teller to guarantee something that is not under his control, there is no analogous problem about staking one's reputation on something that is not under one's control. (Compare with placing a bet on something that is not under one's control, e.g., on whether the horse Makybe Diva will win the Melbourne Cup.) Next, whereas some versions of the Assurance View have trouble explaining how accidental overhearers can have epistemic warrant for beliefs based on testimony not directed at them, the Staking View entails that precisely the same evidence can be available to the addressee as to the overhearer. When the teller chooses to testify, he stakes his reputation. How much he stakes depends upon how great an interest he has in establishing and maintaining a reputation as a good testifier with respect to his intended hearer. But all of this evidence can be available to the overhearer, just as it is available to the intended hearer.

Further, the Staking View can locate epistemic responsibility for beliefs based on testimony entirely with the recipient of the testimony, which is in keeping with our ordinary practices of holding each other accountable for false testimony. And lastly, because the Staking View explains how testimony yields *evidence* for the truth of what is testified, it encounters no special difficulty in explaining how hearers acquire epistemic warrant (and knowledge) from testimony. All that is needed is a theory of how evidence in general relates to epistemic warrant. Though this is no doubt a controversial matter, there is no special difficulty here for the epistemology of testimony.

V. Objections Answered

In this section, we consider and respond to three objections to the Staking View.

Objection 1: The Staking View cannot explain how hearers can acquire epistemic warrant from passersby on the street. Suppose we are wandering around Canberra, and we need to find out how to get to the Coombs Building. We ask a stranger passing by on the street, and he tells us that we should go in such-and-such direction. Since we are unlikely to run into him again (even in Canberra), he has no great interest in establishing a reputation as a good testifier with respect to us. Therefore, in telling us what he does, he does not really stake his reputation as a testifier. But intuitively, we acquire from his testimony epistemic warrant for the belief that we should go in such-and-such direction in order to get to the Coombs Building, perhaps even knowledge that this is the case.

Response: There are several things to say here. One is that there are good reasons to adopt a general strategy of reliability, without counting the cost too much on particular occasions. Humans are creatures of habit, and a general policy of reliable testifying is likely to lead to less risk of reputation than deciding in each case whether to be reliable. It is also hard to tell in advance when testifying badly to the chance-met acquaintance on the street will have bad consequences: after all, it is a small world. So we might have good reason to think that people we meet in the street will reliably testify because they have good reason to attempt to be generally reliable, instead of re-doing the sums on every occasion to decide whether reliability is to their advantage.

Additionally, the Staking View does not deny that hearers can (and should) rely upon evidence other than evidence constituted by the fact that the teller has staked his reputation. Thus, if there is evidence that most Canberrans are truth-tellers, or that most people tell the truth when they have nothing at stake (and so, no particular reason to lie), all of that is relevant in this context as well. Moreover, the Staking View is also compatible with non-reductionist

views on testimony, insofar as such views allow that hearers can rationally accept testimony as long as there is no available evidence that tells against doing so.

It is also worth highlighting a further aspect of the case described in this objection. Suppose that while wandering around Canberra trying to find the Coombs Building, we know that the building is made up of three hexagonal parts. Having followed the directions given to us by the passerby, we see in the distance a building that should be the Coombs Building if the directions were correct. From our perspective, however, the building does not look at all hexagonal. Intuitively, we are far more likely to take our warrant to have been defeated in this case than if we had been given the same directions by even an occasional acquaintance. Again, the Staking View bears out this intuition. Insofar as the acquaintance expects to interact with us in the future (even if only occasionally), he has more at stake when he testifies than the passerby. Therefore, his testimony would have constituted better evidence (and so, would have yielded epistemic warrant that is less easily defeated) than the passerby's testimony. The Staking View has something plausible to say about why even occasional acquaintances are *ceteris paribus* better sources of epistemic warrant than people off the street.

Objection 2: The Staking View cannot explain how hearers can acquire epistemic warrant from testifiers who have a long and perfect track record in testifying. Imagine a politician who has testified to us (his constituents) twenty-five times, and has been right each of those times. He has thereby established an excellent reputation as a testifier. As a result, if he gets things wrong on the next occasion that he testifies, it will not damage his reputation with respect to us significantly. So, when he testifies on the next occasion, he does not stake his reputation to any significant extent. But intuitively, we acquire epistemic warrant from his testimony.

Response: According to the Staking View, when a testifier gets things wrong, that detracts from his reputation as a testifier, while when he gets things right, that enhances that reputation. But this still leaves open a number of possibilities regarding exactly how the testifier's reputation is

determined by his track record. For example, it may be that getting things wrong damages a testifier's reputation far more than getting things right helps. This might be the case if it turns out that hearers remember (and keep track of) instances in which people say false things much better than they remember (and keep track of) instances in which they get things right. Or else, it may be that, even when a testifier has a long record of testifying to a particular hearer, the hearer's assessment of his reputation depends more strongly on whether he got things right in the last few instances than in the earlier instances. This might be the case if it turns out that hearers are just not able to keep track of long track records. But if either of these possibilities is realized (and both seem fairly plausible), then even the politician with the long and perfect track record will have a strong interest in getting things right on the next occasion he testifies, though that interest might be somewhat less strong than it would have been if he had a less good reputation as a testifier.

In addition, it is worth emphasizing once again that the Staking View does not deny that hearers can (and should) rely upon evidence other than evidence constituted by the fact that the teller has staked his reputation. (See the first two paragraphs of the response to Objection 1.) Therefore, even if the politician does not stake his reputation as a testifier in this particular instance, we (his audience) still have other evidence (e.g., his long and perfect track record as a testifier) on which to rely when deciding whether to believe what he says.

Objection 3: The Staking View gets the right results with respect to testimony among friends (and others in close interpersonal relationships) only by making implausible assumptions about the nature of such relationships. Suppose two close friends are talking. One tells the other something that turns out to be false. The speaker knows that the hearer will forgive him, precisely because they are such good friends. More importantly, the speaker also knows that it will not significantly change the high regard the hearer has for him, given their long-standing friendship. Thus, he has no incentive to take a lot of trouble to make sure he is right about what he testifies, contrary to what the Staking View supposes.

Response: It is important here to distinguish between regard for someone as a testifier, and regard for someone as a friend. It is possible to have high regard for someone in the first respect, while having low regard for them in the second respect, and conversely. If a close friend repeatedly gets things wrong, that need not give us reason to think less of them as a friend, but it will likely lower our opinion of them as a testifier. Given that we know this, this gives us an interest in getting things right when testifying to close friends, even though we also know that we will be forgiven if we fail. And that is all that is required by the Staking View.

It is also worth remembering that it is no part of the Staking View that staking of reputations is the only evidential route in testimony. If we know that a friend very much wants us to believe the truth (e.g., so that we avoid harm based on mistakes), that might give us reason to suppose that the friend is being honest and not knowingly passing on negligently acquired beliefs, two things which give us better reason to believe him (even apart from thinking that the friend wants to guard his reputation as a testifier). We doubt that there is any tension between the Staking View and the concern friends typically have for each other.

VI. Conclusion

Testimony does, after all, yield evidence for the person being told. The hearer, typically, can treat the saying-so as a rational action, one where the teller, whatever else her interests, has an interest in not damaging her reputation as a testifier. Knowing this reputation is on the line (to a greater or lesser extent), the hearer is also in a position to know that what is said is something the teller is prepared to bet is true. The Staking View thus explains why this sort of evidence must be deliberately produced: the telling must be a voluntary and intentional action, otherwise it is not a staking of the teller's reputation. It also explains the interpersonal nature of testimony: it is the interpersonal transaction that goes along with the saying that is crucial for understanding testimony's epistemic function.

While sharing with the Assurance View the goals of explaining why testimony is not tainted like “doctored” evidence typically is, and how its interpersonal character is crucial for its core epistemic value, the Staking View offers different explanations of each of these features than the Assurance View. Testimony is distinctive, according to the Staking View, but not so distinctive that it forces us to reject epistemic individualism, or to treat it as a non-evidential source of epistemic warrant, thereby raising the problem of how to integrate testimony with other sources of warrant in deciding what to believe, and what to act upon. Why take our word for it? Because our word for it is evidence after all. Trust us.

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