

Testimony as a Generative Source of Knowledge*

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Abstract

I defend the view that in some cases testimony can generate new knowledge. I draw upon work by Jennifer Lackey [1999] and criticisms of that work by Ciara Fairley [2008]. My aim is to outline a conception of the way in which testimony can be a generative source of knowledge which is distinct from Lackey's conception of how testimony can be generative.

1 Testimony as a Source of Knowledge

For the purposes of this essay I will understand testimony in terms of a speaker (writer, etc.) *telling* a hearer (reader, etc.) something. The details of further conditions on x being a genuine instance of testimony (or not) are something I leave aside here since tellings raise important epistemological questions. (For a thorough discussion of what testimony is see Coady [1992], cf. Lackey [2008], Chapter 1).

It seems obvious that we learn things by being told them. We come to know a vast amount by reading and listening to the words of others. As such, testimony—as I'm understanding it—can be a source of knowledge: it is a way of coming to know, and hence a source of knowledge as is perception, memory, and reason. (I draw upon Cassam [2007] for the connection between ways of coming to know and sources of knowledge.)

What can be said by way of explaining how testimony can be a source of knowledge? A plausible answer is that testimony “transfers” or “transmits” knowledge from one to another. Call this model of the sense in which testimony can be a source of knowledge the *transference-model*. The model holds that via testimony knowledge can be passed on from one to another and in this sense testimony is a source of knowledge. For instance, testimony is a source of my knowledge that Plato taught Socrates. I learned (came to know) this by being told so by *knowledgeable* teachers and books written by *knowledgeable* authors.

The transference-model says:

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1. Testimony can transfer knowledge from one to another (and hence, can be a source of knowledge for the recipient).

(1) seems—scepticism aside—unassailable. There is a temptation, however, to formulate the obvious facts I have been discussing, so as to get:

2. *Whenever* testimony is a source of knowledge it transfers knowledge from one to another.

A representative author who holds something like (2) is Robert Audi, consider the following:

I *cannot* (testimonially) give you knowledge that p without knowing that p . . . Testimonial based knowledge is received by transmission and so depends on the attester's knowing that p (1997, p. 410. See also Audi, 2006, emphasis added).

The stronger (2) is adhered to by various authors in the epistemology of testimony either implicitly or explicitly (see e.g., Burge [1993], McDowell [1998], Plantinga [1993], Ross [1975], Welbourne [1994] and Williamson [1996]). Some argue for it, some assume it, and some write as if (2), not just (1), is obviously true. This state of the epistemology of testimony is worrying if (2) is false. But *is it?* I want to defend the view that it is false in what follows.

2 Testimony as a Source: Three Models

Call (1) the *weak transference-model*, and (2) the *strong transference-model*. I will assume from now on that all (non-sceptical) parties to the debate will endorse the former—or something like it. The issue then is over whether or not the latter is true.

If one is to undermine the strong transference-model one needs to do so without thereby undermining the weak transference-model. The conclusion one needs is: although testimony can be a source of knowledge in the way specified by the weak transference-model, *it isn't always a source of knowledge in this sense*.

Jennifer Lackey aims for something like this conclusion. To that end Lackey argues for an *additional* sense in which testimony is a source of knowledge. As well as transferring knowledge testimony can, Lackey argues, *generate* new knowledge. On this additional understanding of testimony as a source, it's not true that 'speakers cannot give knowledge that p unless they have something [knowledge] to give' (Lackey [1999], p. 471). Testimony can, like perception, generate new knowledge. Call this additional understanding of how testimony is a source of knowledge, the *generative conception*.

Let's summarise the three ways of conceiving testimony as a source of knowledge (concerning for the moment simple testimonial "chains" of two):

1. *the weak transference-model*: Testimony is (at least sometimes) a source of knowledge insofar as knowledge (Kp) is transferred from a knower A to a recipient B who thereby becomes a new knower (with respect to p) on the basis of A's testimony. It is necessary that A is knowledgeable

(with respect to p) for B to become knowledgeable (with respect to p) on the basis of A's testimony. It is left open that testimony is a source of knowledge in an additional sense.

2. *the strong transference-model:* Testimony is (at least sometimes) a source of knowledge insofar as knowledge (Kp) is transferred from a knower A to a recipient B who thereby becomes a new knower (with respect to p) on the basis of A's testimony. It is necessary that A is knowledgeable (with respect to p) for B to become knowledgeable (with respect to p) on the basis of A's testimony. *There is no other sense in which testimony is a source of knowledge.*
3. *the generative conception:* Testimony is (at least sometimes) a source of knowledge insofar as testimony (somehow) generates *new* knowledge (Kp) for a recipient B, who, on the basis of A's testimony (p), becomes a new knower. The giver, A, is not knowledgeable (with respect to p). It is left open that testimony is a source of knowledge in an additional sense.

2.1 Clarifications

This is a rough and ready map of the logical space, there are further options available. What seems central to the transference models is that we conceive of knowledge as transferred in a linear fashion, to put it metaphorically: knowledge is transferred across links in a chain; and the ultimate source of the knowledge (the chain) is non-testimonial (e.g. the original knowledge might originate in perception).

To impose a condition on the transference models that *every* link (person) in the chain must be knowledgeable seems overly restrictive. Let's say that A knows that p , and A tells B that p , and B tells C that p . For C to come to know that p , must it be the case that A *and* B know that p ? Or is it just required that A knows that p ? A version of the transference-model that excludes non-knowledgeable links in principle, will fail to capture our intuitions in some cases (see below). It seems then, that the transference model had better incorporate the fact that not every link—testifier—needs to be knowledgeable (so long as the first link is).

What of the generative conception? Testimony conceived along transference lines yields new knowers, testimony conceived along generative lines is capable of yielding new *knowledge* (as is many cases of perception) [Fairley, 2008]. This distinction and the above specification of the generative conception helps us to understand what an alternative to the strong transference-model would be. Moreover, given what was said above by way of clarifying the transference models we should add, to the generative conception, the condition that *no* link in the testimonial chain is knowledgeable. Further clarification is, however, needed on understanding the generative conception (see section 6).

Details aside, it is enough to show the falsity of the strong transference-model that one can show that there are cases of testimonial knowledge that fit (3), the generative conception, since built into the strong transference-model is the claim that *no* such cases exist. Hence, I turn next to one of Lackey's thought experiments which aims to depict a situation in which testimonial knowledge fits (3).

3 Lackey vs. Fairley

In her [1999] Lackey offers some thought experiments which aim to describe cases in which knowledge is acquired by testimony yet the giver of the testimony doesn't have knowledge (Lackey has different kinds of cases too, see also her [2008]). I want to focus upon one case that Lackey offers and Fairley's response to this case. Following Fairley, let's call the case EVOLUTION. Lackey writes

Suppose that a Catholic elementary school requires that all teachers include sections on evolutionary theory in their science classes and that the teachers conceal their own personal beliefs regarding this subject-matter. Mrs Smith, a teacher at the school in question, goes to the library, researches this literature from reliable sources, and on this basis develops a set of reliable lecture notes from which she will teach the material to her students. Despite this, however, Mrs Smith is herself a devout creationist and hence does not believe that evolutionary theory is true, but she none the less follows the requirement to teach the theory to her students. Now assuming that evolutionary theory is true, in this case it seems reasonable to assume that Mrs Smith's students can come to have knowledge via her testimony, despite the fact that she fails [to believe] hence does not have the knowledge in question herself. *That is, it seems that she can give to her students what she does not have herself.* For in spite of Mrs Smith's failure to believe and therewith to know the propositions she is reporting to her students about evolution, she is a reliable testifier for this information, and on the basis of her testimony it seems that the students in question can come to have knowledge of evolutionary theory (p. 477, emphasis added).

(We are assuming, in the above case, that Mrs Smith is *genuinely testifying*, although this can be questioned (Fairley, [2008])).

The italicised claim is the conclusion that Lackey draws from this case. It is, in essence, the conclusion that knowledge—in such cases—is *generated* not transferred. We need to be clear on whether this is what the EVOLUTION case shows. To get clear we can ask two questions. First, (a) do the students come to know? Second, (b) does testimony *generate* the knowledge?

Regarding (a), that the students in the above case come to know is—as far as Lackey sees things, and I agree—intuitive. One might say it is the best, or most plausible explanation of how we are to conceive of the epistemic standings of the students given the details of the case. It seems strained to take it that students can't—owing to a lack of a teacher's belief in a matter—learn from a reliable source, offering true well researched information, in an epistemically secure pedagogical environment: an environment such that the *truth* is conveyed to the students (unwittingly) despite the personal and religious judgements of the conveyor.

That aside, the pressing question is (b), whether we get the conclusion that testimony *generates* knowledge, rather than just delivers it? In answer to this we can consider now an objection of Ciara Fairley's:

Still EVOLUTION does not show that testimony is a generative source of knowledge: that testimony can increase the total number

of propositions known, as opposed to the number of individuals who know them.

Thus far Fairley's accusation against Lackey is that her example doesn't offer a case where the product of the testimony is new *knowledge*, hence, it is not right to characterise the case along the lines of the generative conception. That is, the truths that Mrs Smith conveys were discovered by Darwin by non-testimonial means. In this case the students weren't the first to know these truths. What we have is just a complex *transference* case (see section 2.1), where one of the links in the chain is not knowledgeable.

Fairley's conclusion is that

At most, then, EVOLUTION promises to show that we can acquire knowledge from other people even where they do not themselves possess that knowledge... This does not show that testimony can generate knowledge any more than transfers on the stock market generate additional stock. We cannot hold onto the traditional view in the particular form in which Audi advances it, but the essentials of that view remain untouched by this example (pp. 5–6).

I want now to do two things. First, I want to offer a reply to Fairley on behalf of Lackey. I then want to offer a reply to Lackey on behalf of Fairley.

Reply to Fairley on behalf of Lackey: Fairley complained, rightly, that in EVOLUTION, no new *knowledge* is generated via testimony. The solution requires that we change the example. Hence, suppose that Mrs Smith is an ingenious investigator and draws certain (deductive or ampliative) inferences, or arrives at certain (true) hypotheses that previous scientists hadn't arrived at (by further empirical work). Now, she teaches this stuff too, the "advanced-evolution science". And this really is new information, but she, because of her Catholic-Creationist faith, doesn't believe a word of it. Not only does Mrs Smith not know, there are no other knowledgeable links in the chain (not even Darwin) with respect to this new information. A plausible conclusion is that Mrs Smith's testimony of this new information will serve as a generative source for the *new* knowledge that the students come to have.

Reply on Behalf of Fairley: The problem with the above modification is, it might be argued, that it is Mrs Smith's *non-testimonial investigations* that generate the knowledge, strictly speaking. Even if, peculiarly, the knowledge is not generated *for her*. How? One might say, a certain sort of information is generated for her (which isn't exploited, and hence from which she doesn't form a belief), and that information is transmitted via testimony, such that the students come to know. But, in such a case it is not the *testimony* which generates the knowledge, it is Mrs Smith's epistemic work in acquiring the information. Possession of information is not the same thing as belief (Evans [1982]), so it is consistent with the case that Mrs Smith possesses the information yet doesn't believe it. Behind this reply is something like the thought that, strictly, the students don't come to know via testimony, but via Mrs Smith's investigations *and* (or perhaps *through*) testimony. That is, if anything is a generative source of knowledge here it is Mrs Smith's non-testimonial investigations.

The reply I have offered on behalf of Fairley is slightly puzzling. The puzzle is that we *do* seem to have a case that fits the generative conception as defined

above. That is, we have a case where testimony is the source of the student's new knowledge—the students did come to know by hearing the testimony—yet it also seems that there is something in the complaint that testimony does not strictly generate the knowledge in such a case. This might lead us to believe that the term “generative” is misleading, or at least not helpful in characterising testimony as a source of knowledge. I shall return to a clarification of the generative conception below (section 6).

For now, I want to see how we can resist the current conclusion and take it that Mrs Smith's testimony of the new evolution science is a generative source of knowledge after all. First I want to consider Fairley's discussion of memory as (in some cases) a generative source of knowledge.

4 Fairley on Memory as a Generative Source

By the original definition of “generative”, memory is a generative source of knowledge just in case when one comes to know by remembering, the knowledge one arrives at is new knowledge. The opposing position to viewing memory as generative is the standard view that memory functions only to *preserve* knowledge: that is to say, whenever memory is a source of one's knowledge it is only because some truth formerly known (or originally known) is remembered (and hence the original knowledge is preserved by the operation of memory (see Burge [1993])).

Fairley argues that although the preservation model might be true of a vast amount of cases it is not universally true. Fairley wants to establish this with a thought experiment, KEYS:

On Tuesday evening I get in late from work and absent-mindedly put my keys down on the sideboard before retiring to bed. The next morning, wanting to leave the house, I start hunting around for my keys. Where are they, I wonder? I try to think back to where I might have left them, mentally retracing my steps in memory, and then I remember: I left them on the sideboard. I thereby come to know where my keys are by remembering where I left them (p. 18).

In this case, since the subject remembers and thereby comes to know, memory is taken to be the source of the subject's knowledge. But is it a *generative* source? Fairley thinks it is. The general point is that it's

[v]ery hard to defend the view that memory always functions merely to remind us of that once forgotten. One reason is that we do not always form beliefs about our surroundings. It is not that we form them and forget; often we simply don't pay enough attention to have an opinion in the first place. It is only later, in recollecting the scene, that we attend closely enough to notice certain things and form beliefs about them. Again, it is true that in order to remember, we must have registered the scene that we later recall. But this sort of registration needn't always issue in belief. . . Perhaps I was in a position to know that my keys were on the sideboard. . . [but] given that I did not attend, perception cannot be said to be the source of my knowledge. To assume otherwise is to assume that whether

we attend never makes a difference to whether to know. This is unwarranted (19-20).

Is this convincing? We have a case in which remembering is, plausibly, a way of coming to know. Yet, the “preservation” model which opposes the generative conception of memory doesn’t seem appropriate, since one does not remember what one forgot (having previously had knowledge of what one forgot). Assuming that there was no belief or knowledge (due to lack of perceptual attention) at the time of putting the keys on the side, when one later remembers knowledge seems to be generated. (If one is not inclined to believe that there is no knowledge or belief in this case, perhaps a slight modification will help: imagine that the subject believes that the keys are on the chair (not the sideboard), and then in the morning remembers that they are on the sideboard. Given the belief that the keys are on the chair, it seems plausible that the subject will not have (at any point before remembering) the belief that they are on the sideboard; so the remembering the following morning is not recollection of a belief that was forgotten.)

However, pressure might be put on Fairley’s conclusion in a similar way to the pressure applied above to the idea that Mrs Smith’s testimony of the new evolution science was a generative source of knowledge.

We might suppose that *something* is generated at the time when our key-placer puts the keys down, despite the fact that it isn’t knowledge. A plausible candidate is that one acquires some information via perception. The information is obviously not registered at the time of its acquisition. But it’s plausible that information is acquired since having such information helps explain *how* one can remember where one placed the keys *despite* not having a belief about doing it (that is, despite one’s explanation of how one remembered *not* being able to take the form: I recalled something (a belief) I forgot). Call this the “informational picture”.

But now we seem to be in a similar position to the position we were in with testimony above. The question is, if the “informational picture” is correct, does it mean that memory doesn’t, strictly speaking, *generate* the knowledge? One answer is that it does mean this, since what is strictly speaking *generated* is perceptual information. When the information is recollected and brought into consciousness it then becomes knowledge. This seems like a similar conclusion to that above regarding EVOLUTION. Behind this is something like the thought that, strictly, we come to know via (the original) perception with memory as a mere aid. As such, if anything is a generative source of knowledge in this case it is the key placer’s initial perception, not memory.

Once more the position we have arrived at is the rather odd position where a source of knowledge is classified as generative, yet, doesn’t, strictly speaking, generate the knowledge.

4.1 A Reply

The above reflections are capable of showing, at best, that when one puts one’s keys down, it is *something-but-not-knowledge* (plausibly: information) that is generated by the key-placer’s perceptions. But it is a further move to say that “strictly speaking perception is therefore the generative source of the key-placer’s knowledge”.

To flesh this further move out one might say: “The information that is initially generated eventually *becomes* the knowledge which is the end product of a long process of knowledge generation. So strictly it is perception which is the *generative* source of the knowledge that the keys are on the side.”

But what can it mean to say that the information “becomes” the knowledge? Does it mean that one’s information is the basis for a belief which one (eventually) forms, which then figures in one’s eventual knowledge? If so then this can be resisted by taking knowledge to be a non-composite mental state, like Williamson does [2000]. As such the information doesn’t “become” the knowledge, nothing does, since knowledge is a mental state in its own right. (In making this move we don’t have to endorse Williamson’s specific account, since in principle a non-composite mental state doesn’t have to be a propositional attitude, one might think that the object of knowledge is just part constitutive of the frame of mind which is knowing (Travis [2005], p. 288), and the object of knowledge is a fact or a truth, where this is distinct from a true proposition).

In the next section I offer a characterisation of the cases according to which it is plausible to view memory and testimony as generative sources of the knowledge. I don’t claim to establish anything as strong as that we *must* view memory and testimony in the way I suggest.

5 Memory and Testimony as Generative Sources

The suggestion I want to make involves adherence to the informational picture in a sense, but with an important division of labour. In relation to the KEYS case one might say that one’s perceptual intake of where one placed the keys (the informational state acquired) serves as an *enabling condition* for memory to be a generative source of knowledge. As such, it wouldn’t be possible to come to know that the keys are on the side, by remembering, had one not acquired the sub-personal informational state one acquired when one placed the keys down. Acquiring that state is a condition of the possibility of coming to know by memory. This, it seems, is because in acquiring that state one is thereby put *in a position to know*, by perception, where the keys are—even though one doesn’t know. According to this modified informational picture we have a division of labour between enabling conditions on the one hand, and sources of knowledge (ways of coming to know) on the other. (Note this isn’t Graham’s [2000] “Information-Theoretic” approach to testimony. Two salient differences are that Graham has a specific conception of information and conveying information which I’m here neutral on, and Graham doesn’t utilise the division of labour I recommend.)

The importance of information-generation at the perceptual level is not being ignored or undermined, on the contrary its enabling role is vitally important. We are just resisting the move to thinking that memory doesn’t generate the knowledge. Instead we can say the following: in the KEYS case, memory generates the knowledge insofar as it is that which produces a knowledgeable state of mind in the key-placer, a state of mind the production of which wouldn’t be possible without the possession of perceptual information (perceptual information which puts one in a position to know). It is memory, *not* perception, which produces that state of mind, since one comes to know by remembering not by perceiving. That is, if one were asked “how did you come to know?” in such a

case the correct answer would be “by remembering”. Perception, and information generation, enters our picture when we ask how it is that by remembering one comes to have new knowledge.

It was noted above, in relation to testimony, that there might be thought to be something misleading about the original generative conception, since it allowed for cases where although a source counted as generative (by the definition), the important generative work was being done elsewhere. However, this can now be resisted. It’s not the case that *knowledge* generation is going on elsewhere—even though what goes on elsewhere puts one in a position to know. It is information-generation that is going on elsewhere, and *because* of this, memory is able to produce new knowledge (but there is, I think, still something wrong with the generative conception as it has been understood so far, see section 6).

Can any of this help us with the question of whether *testimony* can be generative? I believe it can. It will be remembered that in section 3 we considered a situation in which a Catholic-Creationist teacher, Mrs Smith, tells students certain things which she doesn’t believe, and therefore doesn’t know. However, what she is in possession of is epistemically well grounded (reliably formed, etc.) true information (the new evolution science). In the context in question it was natural to suppose that the students came to know on the basis of Mrs Smith’s testimony. We seemed to have a case of new knowers and new *knowledge*, given that the information was known *first* by the students. The *problem* with the case, with respect to the view that testimony was flouted as a generative source of knowledge, was that insofar as information *is* generated, it is *not* generated by testimony, but by Mrs Smith’s investigations. As such, one might have been moved to think that it was Mrs Smith’s non-testimonial investigative work that was the generative source of the knowledge, not her testimony.

By accepting the division of labour that the modified informational picture requires, we are no longer compelled, however, to the conclusion that testimony plays the merely transmissive role. It is open to us to hold that in the case at hand, Mrs Smith’s (non-testimonial) investigative work, and her subsequent acquisition of new information—which puts her in a position to know, even though she doesn’t—serves to *enable* testimony (with respect to that information) to do genuinely generative work with respect to the knowledge acquired by the students on hearing Mrs Smith speak.

Mrs Smith’s acquisition of the information through investigation serves as an enabling condition, enabling Mrs Smith’s testimony to produce new knowledge in the students. In this sense, testimony can be a generative source of knowledge.

We can still say that Mrs Smith is “passing on information” if we want to. But it doesn’t follow that the student’s knowledge just is that true information, perhaps with it being justified or warranted. Rather, the alternative is that *by* Mrs Smith passing on information, that is, *by the students hearing her testimony* the students come to be in a particular state of mind which is knowledge. Mrs Smith’s testimony produces new knowledge and it is enabled to do so by her prior investigations.

6 The Generative Conception Revisited

Although the requirement that for a source of knowledge to be generative it must be capable of producing new knowledge gives some sense to it being “generative”, it doesn’t capture what goes on in a lot of cases of perceptual knowledge—and perception is supposed to be the generative source *par excellence*.

Quite often perception produces new knowers *as opposed* to new knowledge. We are not thereby inclined to view perception as, in those cases, non-generative in the sense of being *transmissive*. For example, I know by perception that *the door to 10 Downing Street is black* (I see that it is). But this isn’t new knowledge since many people, let’s suppose, came to know this same fact, by perception, before I did. Yet my perception that the door is black is not a transmissive source where knowledge is transmitted from *other people* to me.

It seems that perception can be a source of knowledge yet fail to be generative by the definition given above, *and* fail to be transmissive. Can testimony be a source of knowledge yet fail to be generative, and fail to be transmissive? It seems not: in what other sense would testimony *still be* a source of knowledge if not either generatively or by the transference model?

Perhaps the best way in which to understand a generative source of knowledge is in terms of it being non-transmissive, *regardless of the production of new knowledge*. Is there a sense in which testimony can be generative *qua* non-transmissive? It seems so. Think back to the case of Mrs Smith who engages in investigative activities drawing new true conclusions about evolution science, which she nonetheless doesn’t come to know. It was suggested that her telling her students these new truths was a generative source of knowledge, in the original sense: new knowledge was produced. But let’s say a student, Jones, enters the class late, and Mrs Smith repeats some of her findings. Jones comes to know. But his knowledge is not *new*. Is the source of knowledge in Jones’ case thereby not generative? On the original definition, it is not. However, it seems that there is no significant difference in the case of Jones’ acquisition of knowledge compared to his classmates. This suggests that it is not the production of new knowledge that is important in our understanding of how a source of knowledge can be generative, but rather the fact of non-transference. The understanding of generativity *qua* non-transmission captures this. The original class *and* Jones come to know by a generative source of knowledge (Mrs Smith’s testimony) insofar as that source is non-transmissive (of knowledge).

Generative testimony in terms of non-transmissivity (of knowledge) has the following virtues: it aligns it *qua generative* source of knowledge with perception, allowing us to say that all perception is generative, by virtue of it being non-transmissive. Hence, the status of perception as the generative source of knowledge *par excellence* is not impugned. Furthermore, we can distinguish how Jones *and* the class acquire knowledge from a different case, where one of Jones’ knowledgeable fellow students communicates the truths to Jones, upon Jones’ late arrival. In the former two cases Mrs Smith’s testimony is generative, in the latter the pupils’ testimony is transmissive.

This section is designed to scrutinise the generative conception, but it should be noted that the above result where it was suggested that testimony can be generative is not altered by switching to the weaker conception of generativity advanced in this section.

7 Conclusion

I have tried to defend the view that testimony can be a generative source of knowledge by the original definition which requires that testimony is a generative source of knowledge when it is a source of *new knowledge*. Here I have placed emphasis on the productive source of knowledge and what enables the source to do productive work. At the level of enabling conditions I have appealed to information acquisition. Such information acquisition puts the subject in a *position to know*, even if they don't know. It was also suggested that it is perhaps more fruitful to understand a generative source in a weaker way as simply non-transmissive.

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