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Is There A Priori Knowledge by Testimony?

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1. Preliminaries

In a series of recent papers, Tyler Burge (1993, 1997, 1999) draws an analogy between the perceptual processes normally involved in the acquisition of belief from others, and the memory processes normally involved in deductive reasoning. Both processes, he argues, are *purely preservative*, where a purely preservative process is one that “introduces no subject matter, constitutes no element in a justification, and adds no force to a justification or entitlement. It simply maintains in justificational space a cognitive content with its judgmental force” (Burge 1993, 465). A purely preservative process, then, makes a belief (or other attitude) available, for later use or use by others; moreover, it does so without adding to, or altering, the original epistemic status of the belief (see, for example, *ibid.*, 466, 486–87 and 1997, 37). It just transfers the original warrant (if any) along with the belief, from one’s earlier self to one’s later self, or from the source to the recipient of testimony. Importantly, the process does not affect the warrant’s being a priori or a posteriori; nor does it affect the warrant’s strength. So, on Burge’s view, if one’s earlier self has a priori (or a posteriori) warrant for the belief that *p*, then, if all goes

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well,¹ one's later self, who remembers that *p*, has a priori (or a posteriori) warrant for the belief that *p* too. Likewise in the case of testimony: if the source has a priori (or a posteriori) warrant for the belief that *p*, then, if all goes well, the recipient too has a priori (or a posteriori) warrant for that belief. If, furthermore, the original warrant is of a strength sufficient for knowledge, then, other things being equal, one's later self, or the recipient, has a priori (a posteriori) knowledge that *p*. According to Burge, then, both memory and testimony can—and sometimes do—yield a priori knowledge.²

My focus here will be on testimony; more precisely, my focus will be on the claim that the perceptual processes normally involved in the acquisition of belief from others are purely preservative. I will argue that some such processes are *not* purely preservative—they play an epistemic role—and so there is no a priori warranted belief or a priori knowledge by testimony. For reasons that will emerge at the end of the essay, I do not think that what I argue carries over to the case of memory. I treat this as a welcome consequence, since the claim that deductive reasoning can and does deliver a priori knowledge has independent appeal. (This is not true of the corresponding claim about testimony.) In the last section, I will suggest two ways in which to press a disanalogy between memory and testimony, without compromising my conclusion about testimony (see section 9).

1. For all to go well, there must be no defeaters. If there are, no warrant is preserved. Moreover, if the a priori status of a warrant is to be preserved, one must not rely on any supplementary a posteriori warrant (to believe that *p*, or to rely on memory/one's source). Also, there must be no a posteriori "defeater-defeaters." (To illustrate: suppose that professor *X* tells me a complex mathematical theorem *T*, which he just proved, but that professor *Y* tells me that *X* is highly unreliable, thus providing me with an [undercutting] defeater for believing *T*. Later I catch *Y* spreading blatant lies about *X* in order to discredit him. I now have a defeater-defeater—a defeater of the defeater provided by *Y*'s testimony. This ensures that I know *T*, but the a posteriori status of the defeater-defeater prevents that knowledge from being a priori.) In the case of testimony, the potential defeaters (and defeater-defeaters) include, not just defeaters pertaining to the original warrant, but defeaters of one's "default entitlements" (see section 2).

2. It is clear that Burge thinks that we can, and *sometimes do*, have a priori knowledge by testimony, that is, he holds that some of our actual testimonial knowledge is a priori (see Burge 1993, 485–87). In some places, he suggests that such knowledge may be rare (see, in particular, Burge 1997, 23). But even if this is Burge's considered view, that does not affect the core of my disagreement with him: as we will see, I deny that a priori knowledge (and a priori warrant) by testimony is even possible.

First, a few preliminaries. Like most writers on testimony, Burge uses the term ‘testimony’ to refer to tellings in general (as opposed to, say, only eye-witness reports by reliable observers). Next, as he uses ‘a priori’, a warrant is a priori if “neither sense experience nor perceptual belief constitute or enhance its justificational force” (Burge 1997, 21).³ A Burgean a priori warrant, then, is independent of perception for its epistemic force, but it may, and usually does, *causally* depend on perception. (This distinction will prove important later.) More controversially, it may be defeasible, even by empirical considerations, and it may be cognitively inaccessible to the person who has it. The warrant that we have for testimony-based beliefs is typically both—both empirically defeasible and cognitively inaccessible.⁴

It might be objected that Burge’s notion of apriority is too weak for his conclusion—that there is a priori knowledge by testimony (and memory)—to be of much interest. (For instance, that any interesting notion of the a priori entails empirical indefeasibility,⁵ and so *who cares* if testimonial knowledge can be a priori in some weaker sense?) But I do not think that this is right. The claim that testimonial knowledge can be independent of perception in the way Burge suggests is a radical and interesting epistemological thesis, whether it is put in terms of apriority or not. For one thing, it has implications for the debate between reductionists and nonreductionists about knowledge by testimony. If Burge is right, then the prospects for reducing testimony as a source of knowledge to sources of other kinds look dim since, presumably, if testimony can be reduced at all, it can be reduced to memory, inference, and *perception*.⁶

Moreover, his thesis is clearly very controversial, however we construe the a priori. Burge is saying that, in a favorable case, I can gain a warranted belief (indeed can come to know) that *p*, by being told that *p*, but that your having uttered certain words—a sentence, say, that means that *p*—does not at all contribute to this warrant. That you uttered those words is *not even part of* what makes me warranted in believing that *p*. If what I argue later is correct, he is also committed to saying that *your having said that p* is not part of my warrant. That you said that *p* may causally explain why I believe that *p*, but it is not among the reasons for which I believe it

3. Compare Burge 1993, 458.

4. So apparently testimony can turn a justification into an entitlement—the source may have justification, but the recipient not—without altering the a priori/a posteriori status or the strength of the warrant. (I explain the distinction between justification and entitlement below.)

5. See Field 2000 and Kitcher 2000.

6. For more on reductionism, see Coady 1992 and Fricker 1995.

(see sections 6–7). Burge is making some very strong claims, then, claims that stand in need of solid backing. But, in fact, he does not make a convincing case for them. (Or so I will argue; see sections 2–3.)

Burge makes a distinction between two kinds of warrant, which distinction plays a crucial role in one of his supporting arguments. (The exact role it plays will become clear when I discuss the argument.) Burge defines *entitlement* as warrant that need not be cognitively accessible, or even intelligible, to the epistemic agent. Entitlement contrasts with *justification*, which he defines as warrant that “involve[s] reasons that people have and have access to[; reasons that] must be available in the cognitive repertoire of the subject” (Burge 1993, 458–59). Burge does not elaborate, but the basic distinction should be clear: justification is an “internalist” type of warrant; entitlement is “externalist.”⁷ Both kinds of warrant attach to propositional attitudes (in the first instance beliefs) but also to cognitive practices, such as the reliance on a cognitive faculty (like perception or memory) or on an inferential rule (*ibid.*, 458). From the use Burge makes of the distinction, it is clear that it is supposed to be exhaustive—there are no other types of warrant (see section 2).

Lastly, we need to clarify the notion of *perception*, as that notion figures in Burge’s discussion of testimony, and in his definition of the *a priori*. First, a detail: Burge uses the term ‘perception’ to refer to all of the following: faculty of perception, perceptual state, and perceptual process. I will do that too. Second, and more importantly: it is clear that Burge is working with a rather *narrow* notion of perception. Only the deliverances of the (outer) senses count as perceptual states in his sense (see, for example, Burge 1993, 460 n. 4).⁸ On a broader conception, introspective states too count as perceptual; and on a yet broader conception, any kind of conscious state counts as perceptual (compare Boghossian and Peacocke 2000, 2).

2. The Role of Perception

According to Burge, the recipient of testimony comes equipped with two default *a priori* warrants—the entitlement to *rely on her understanding*, and the entitlement to *rely on the rationality* of her source. Both of these entitlements must be in place for her to gain knowledge (or warranted

7. At least on the standard account of this distinction, in terms of cognitive access. (Contrast Wedgwood 2002.)

8. For some interesting implications of this, see note 26 and the end of section 9.

belief) by testimony. Only then is she in a position to inherit the warrant, if any, that the source has for believing the proposition she asserts.⁹ Burge says that the recipient often has supplementary a posteriori warrant; but it is crucial that her *basic* entitlements are a priori, and that the supplementary warrant is not *needed* (for testimonial knowledge or warrant)—otherwise, a priori knowledge (or a priori warranted belief) by testimony would not be possible.¹⁰

The entitlement to rely on the rationality of one's source (the recipient's second default entitlement) is an entitlement to believe what one is being told—to believe the proposition one's source "presents as true" (for example, asserts).¹¹ This entitlement stems from a conceptual connection between putative rationality and truth, as stated in Burge's "Acceptance Principle" (see Burge 1993, 467–72). The entitlement to rely on understanding (the recipient's first default entitlement) has a separate source: it is grounded in the reliability of the recipient's linguistic competence.¹² But it is somewhat obscure what this entitlement is an entitlement to believe or do. (As I will sometimes put it, it is obscure what the *object* of this entitlement is.) What kind of thing could I earn warrant for, simply in virtue of being competent with, say, English?

Burge is not as clear as one might wish at this point. But it is natural to suppose that what the reliability of my competence is supposed to provide is an entitlement to particular beliefs about what other speakers of my language are saying (or asking, or commanding, and so on)—for example, the belief that *NN* said that *p*. This suggestion is natural for the following reasons: competent speakers are generally able to identify what other speakers of their language are saying; and presumably it is, at least in part, *because* they are competent speakers that they are able to do so. Next, it is plausible that knowledge by testimony requires a belief

9. And *knowledge* by testimony also requires that there *be* such a warrant—a warrant on the part of the source (Burge 1993, 486).

10. "If my source knows a proposition a priori, but I must rely on empirical knowledge to justify my acceptance of the source's word, it would be wrong to say that *I* know the proposition a priori" (Burge 1993, 486–87, italics in original). Likewise if I must rely on empirical warrant to know what was said (*ibid.*, 476).

11. "Presentation-as-true" is Burge's cover term for assertions, obvious presuppositions, and conventional (but not conversational) implicatures. See Burge 1993, 482 n. 20.

12. "The reliability of the competence (in perception or understanding) is the main source of the individual's warrant." Linguistic competence is further glossed as "a competence to take in what other people say, when they use words one shares with them" (Burge 1999, 233).

of this sort—a belief that one’s source said that *p*. Indeed, it is plausible that it requires a *warranted* belief of this sort (more on this in section 7). So the suggestion accords with the alleged indispensability of the first entitlement.

In some places, Burge writes as if this is what he has in mind—as if the recipient’s first entitlement is an entitlement to a belief about what is said (see, for example, Burge 1993, 476–77; 1997, 24–25).¹³ (It also fits with his gloss on linguistic competence as the “capacity to take in what people say.”) Later I will explore whether he can really avail himself of this suggestion, and what the alternatives are (see sections 4–7). To anticipate, I am going to argue that there is in fact no plausible conception of the object of the entitlement available to Burge, given his other commitments. But in this and the following section, I will adopt the above suggestion as my working hypothesis—I will write as if the recipient’s first entitlement is indeed an entitlement to believe that her source said that *p*. However, none of what I argue in these sections hinges on assuming that this is the case. The discussion in section 2 and section 3 concerns Burge’s argument for the apriority of this entitlement, and my counterargument is perfectly general—it does not presuppose any particular conception of the object of the entitlement.¹⁴

In outline, Burge argues that a perceptual state can only play an epistemic role in the formation of a given belief if it meets one of two criteria, and that neither criterion is met in the case at hand. I argue that Burge’s criteria are not jointly sufficient—that there are many uncontroversial cases in which a perceptual state plays an epistemic role despite flouting both of them. I conclude that Burge does not adequately support the claim that the recipient’s first entitlement is *a priori*—for all he says, it is *a posteriori*. But then, by his own lights, it is not possible to gain *a priori* knowledge by testimony.¹⁵

13. Sometimes Burge talks as if the object of the entitlement is the state of understanding itself (the state of understanding an utterance). But I take it that understanding can only require a warrant if it in turn consists in a (warranted or knowledgeable) belief, and the only plausible candidate belief is a belief about what is said. (But see note 36.) So this possibility is covered by the current interpretation.

14. For further explication of this point, see note 27.

15. Burge’s argument for the apriority of the first entitlement can be found in his 1993, 476–84. (See also his 1997, 30–31; 1999, 240–42.) He primarily discusses the apriority of the second entitlement in his 1993, 470–76. This entitlement (as stated in the Acceptance Principle) is an equally important part of Burge’s theory, but I will not discuss it further here. It requires a paper-length treatment of its own. Moreover, to

Burge acknowledges that perception is necessary for the acquisition of knowledge (and warranted belief) by testimony—the recipient must use perception to understand her source’s utterance, and to exercise her two default entitlements. “Perception is necessary to understanding—even to being entitled to rely upon one’s understanding, and to being entitled to one’s belief in what the interlocutor says” (Burge 1997, 24). But he claims that the relevant perceptual processes (for example, the perception of word occurrences¹⁶) do not contribute any epistemic force to either entitlement—they play a merely causal role, *enabling* the recipient to exercise her a priori entitlements, and *preserving* the warrant, if any, possessed by the source.¹⁷

Burge repeatedly stresses that we must distinguish between the rational or epistemic power behind, and the mere causal enabling conditions of, “understanding and belief” (see, for example, Burge 1993, 460, 476; 1997, 23–24)—and in this he is clearly right: not everything that plays a causal role in the generation of, say, a warranted belief is epistemically relevant. But to emphasize the importance of this distinction is not enough. We also need to know *why* we should think that, in the case at hand, perception (in particular, the perception of words) falls on the nonepistemic side of the divide. Burge says surprisingly little on this matter. Notably, he does not offer any extended discussion of what, in general, it takes for a perceptual state or process to play an epistemic role. But two considerations—corresponding to Burge’s two notions of warrant—can be extracted from his discussion of the first entitlement (here understood as an entitlement to a belief about what is said).

First, against the idea that perception plays a *justificatory* role in the case at hand, he points out that “[w]e seem normally to understand

show that, for all Burge says, knowledge by testimony cannot be a priori, it is enough to show that *one* of the entitlements he claims to be involved is not plausibly seen as a priori.

16. In his papers on testimony, Burge skirts the distinction between perceiving words (what we might call “objectual perception”) and perceiving facts about words (“propositional perception”). In a more recent paper, Burge (2003, 527) claims that reasons are propositional, and that the notion of a propositional perception is “empirically unsupported and implausible.” This, of course, gives him a much quicker way with the claim that perceptions of words play a justificatory role, since justification (in his sense) requires reasons. But this is not how he argues in the papers on testimony.

17. Note that the intended contrast is between epistemic and *merely* causal (Burge is not suggesting that reason-giving states are not also causes). Moreover, as Burge uses “causally *enabling*,” it does not contrast with “causally efficacious.” Rather, on his usage, the “causal enabling conditions” encompass the efficient cause.

content in a way whose unconscious details (inferential or otherwise) are not accessible via ordinary reflection. To be entitled to believe what one is told, one need not understand or be able to justify any transition from perceptual beliefs about words to understanding of and belief in the words' content" (Burge 1993, 477). The claim seems to be that the accessibility condition on justification has somehow been violated; but how exactly has it been violated? I take it that Burge is not denying that the relevant perceptual states are accessible to reflection. Perceptions of words are occurrent conscious states, and so they are presumably accessible in the requisite sense (to subjects with reflective capacities).¹⁸ Rather, he is pointing out that we lack reflective access to *the intermediate psychological steps* that take us from perceptual experiences of words (or perceptual beliefs about words) to beliefs about what is said. That seems right. But, for it to show that perception does not play a justificatory role in the formation of those beliefs, it must be the case that it could only play that role if those intermediate steps (the "unconscious details, inferential or otherwise") were also reflectively accessible. Why does Burge think that?

He does not say; but here is an attempt at reconstructing his motivation: for Burge, *all* the elements of a justificatory structure must be accessible to reflection. Moreover, he takes it as given that perceptions of words fail to provide *complete* justifications for beliefs about what is said; that is, that the content of my perception (say, that you uttered certain words) could not, on its own, justify me in believing that you said that *p*. The only way it could justify that belief is by being part of a larger struc-

18. Burge does not make explicit what he means by "reflective access." If all it takes to reflectively access a mental state is to bring it to conscious awareness, then, trivially, perceptions of words are reflectively accessible. (Likewise for the contents of those perceptions—the candidate reasons.) Similarly, if to reflectively access a state is to know that one is in it, when one is, on the basis of introspection alone. Provided that I have the required concepts, and the capacity for higher-order thought, I am usually able to know by introspection that I have such a perception, when I do—say, that I am hearing or reading certain words. Of course, I am not infallible, and I may be bad at retrospectively identifying what I heard or read. Moreover, I may not be able to know (by introspection or otherwise) that those perceptions confer justification on my belief about what is said. On any of these stronger conceptions of reflective access, perceptions of words are not reflectively accessible. But that does not affect the case against Burge. The counterexamples I give below do not satisfy these stronger access conditions either; see section 3. (Thanks to Nico Silins for discussion of this point.) The modal strength of the relevant notion of accessibility is another point of contention—I will discuss this in section 3.

ture—in effect, a deductive or inductive argument¹⁹—all of whose other elements (premises) are also reflectively accessible. But, in the normal case, I do not have reflective access to the remaining premises of any such argument. That would require conscious representations (or at least consciously *available* representations) of these premises too, and I lack that. Indeed, assuming a causal constraint on justification-conferring states,²⁰ it would require that conscious (or consciously available) representations of the “missing” premises figure among the causal antecedents of my belief about what is said; for instance, that I arrive at that belief via a conscious inference of the appropriate form. But that is not the case. My belief about what is said is arrived at via a series of unconscious mental states, which cannot contribute to the justification, since they are not reflectively accessible.

As I read him, then, Burge is saying that perception could only play a justificatory role in the formation of beliefs about what is said if the transition from the relevant perceptual states to those beliefs were mediated by a chain of reflectively accessible mental states (say, a conscious inference); but it is not, at least not in standard cases.

Second, against the idea that perception plays a (merely) *entitling* role,²¹ Burge argues that the perceptual states in question have, as it were, the *wrong kind of content* to give rise to an entitlement. More precisely, he writes: “When we receive communication [as opposed to when we form ‘ordinary perceptual beliefs about physical objects and properties’], the objects of cognitive interest—the contents and their subject matter—are not the objects of perception. We do not perceive the contents of attitudes that are conveyed to us; we understand them. We perceive and have perceptual beliefs about word occurrences” (Burge 1993, 478).²²

19. I use ‘inductive’ here in a broad sense, to cover all ampliative argument forms (what Burge calls “discursive justifications”).

20. See section 7. In fact, Burge needs a rather specific causal constraint, namely, that a justifying state is a “dynamic” cause—a causal event in a chain of such events, terminating in the formation of your belief. (As opposed to a “sustaining” cause.) This terminology is due to Audi 1993.

21. Where a state or process plays a merely entitling role if it contributes to an entitlement, but does not also contribute to a justification. (The qualification is mine; in the passage under consideration, Burge actually writes as if a state cannot be both justifying and entitling. But I take it that this is a slip on his part.)

22. This argument can also be found in Burge 1997, 31: “Strictly speaking, we do not perceive the assertive mode, or the conceptual content, of utterances. We understand them. These are exercises of intellectual capacities. We understand events as

This passage is hard to interpret. But here is what I think Burge has in mind: sometimes when a belief is based on a perception, the belief and the perception are, as it were, *about the same thing(s)*. For instance, take the case in which I see that there is a hand in front of me and, as a result, come to believe that there is a hand in front of me. In cases such as these, the “object of perception” is indeed “the object of cognitive interest,” in the sense that the perceptual state and the resultant belief represent the same objects and properties. Burge seems to suggest that a perceptual state can play an entitling role only if this condition is met.²³ What he is doing in the passage quoted above, then, is simply pointing out that this condition is *not* met in the case at hand. The putatively entitling perceptions are perceptions of *linguistic expressions*: word and sentence tokens. But the entitled beliefs are about the *contents* these words and sentences express; they are beliefs about what is said.

So Burge seems to hold that for a perceptual state to contribute to an entitlement, there must be an appropriate match in content between perception and belief. Why does he hold that? Burge’s stated reason concerns the explanation of perceptual entitlement. He argues that such entitlement stems from the reliability of the perceptual system, and—crucially—from “[perceptual] beliefs depending systematically for their content and application on the way perceptual objects are presented through sense perception” (Burge 1999, 245).²⁴ The basic idea (elaborated in a recent paper) is that a certain class of beliefs—namely, “beliefs that make reference to the same objects, properties, and relations that the perceptual system represents” (Burge 2003, 542)—get the contents they have by standing in appropriate causal relations to certain features of the external environment (compare Burge 1979) and that the appropriate causal relations involve (veridical) perceptual experiences of those very features. This “constitutive connection,” in turn, explains my entitlement to par-

assertions by perceiving other aspects of assertions. We understand the concepts in assertions, by perceiving expressions of them. But here perception is part of the condition for exercising the intellectual capacity, not—or not normally—part of the warrant for the individual’s relying on his understanding.”

23. In my example, the contents of the perception and the attitude are in fact the same. But the reason I do not think that this—identity of content—is Burge’s criterion is that he writes as though objectual perceptions (say, seeing words) can be entitling. Note also that nothing of relevance to Burge’s argument hinges on whether perceptual evidence is factive or nonfactive (say, on whether the entitling state is *seeing* that there is a hand in front of me, or *having an experience as of* there being a hand in front of me).

24. Note that reliability *alone* cannot yield entitlement (Burge 2004, 532). See also Burge 1993, 478.

ticular beliefs about those features, in cases where the beliefs are based on perceptual states with corresponding contents. But it cannot explain my entitlement, if any, to beliefs that are not based on such states.²⁵

As should be clear, Burge's account of perceptual entitlement is complex and controversial, and I cannot go into it in further detail here. For present purposes, the important point is the condition on entitlement-conferring perceptual states that falls out of it, and the application of that condition to the case at hand. To be perceptually entitled to a belief about what is said, I would have to perceive what is said (and base my belief on that perception). But I do not; I do not perceive what you say, I only perceive the words and sentences with which you say it.²⁶

3. Assessing Burge's Criteria

Judging from Burge's two considerations, it seems that, according to him, a perceptual state *P* can play an epistemic role in the formation of a belief *B* only if at least one of two criteria is met: the move from *P* to *B* is mediated by a chain of reflectively accessible mental states (justification); or, *P* and *B* represent the same objects and properties (mere entitlement). Suppose that this were right; it would then be true that perceptions of words played a merely causal role in the formation of beliefs about what is said. The recipient of testimony does not normally engage in any conscious reasoning process to get from perceptions of (or perceptual beliefs about) words to beliefs about what her source said. Normally, on being told that *p*, she straightaway comes to believe that her source said that *p*, and the details of the mental process leading up to this belief cannot be retrieved by mere reflection. Next, her belief is a belief about *content* (about what her source said), but her perceptual experiences are about

25. It is interesting to note that, in his 2003 paper, Burge wisely distinguishes between *basic* and *nonbasic* perceptual entitlement, only the former of which requires a match in contents. But he does not acknowledge that this undercuts his argument for the apriority of the first entitlement involved in testimony—that argument *crucially* depends on there being no perceptual entitlement of the nonbasic sort.

26. One might object that I *do* perceive what is said; and so, by Burge's own criterion, my perceptions *are* entitling. (Compare Fricker 2003, McDowell 1980, and Strawson 1994 on "quasi-perceptions" of meaning.) But recall that Burge is working with a rather narrow notion of perception (see section 1), and it is only on a very broad construal of perception that I can perceive what is said. So it is not clear that this objection engages Burge's argument. (I owe this point to Paul Boghossian.) If one wanted to pursue the objection, one would have to argue that apriority should be understood in terms of the broader notion of perception, and/or argue directly against the tenability of the narrow notion.

words; and so her perceptions have “the wrong kind of content” to entitle her to this belief. By Burge’s criteria, then, the perception of words neither *justifies* nor *entitles* the recipient to believe that her source said that *p*. Insofar as she has warrant for believing that at all, her warrant must originate elsewhere.²⁷

But this cannot possibly be right. There are many clear cases of perceptually warranted belief that are not captured by Burge’s criteria.²⁸ Consider, for instance, my coming to believe that professor *X* is in his office, on the basis of seeing that the lights are on, or my coming to believe that Australia won the U.S. Open, on the basis of hearing that primeval cries are coming from the local Aussie beerhouse. At least part of my warrant for believing both that *X* is in his office and that Australia won the U.S. Open is perceptual. But Burge’s second criterion is not met, and we need not assume that the first is met either. The perceptual state that grounds my belief that *X* is in his office clearly has the “wrong kind of content.” By hypothesis, the belief is not based on seeing *that X is in his office/X being in his office*. It is based on seeing *that the lights are on/the lights being on*. Moreover, I need not have arrived at the belief via any reflectively accessible mental process from the belief (or the perception) that the lights are on. It does seem plausible that my (total) warrant has an inferential structure—arguably, that of an inference to the best explanation—but I need not have arrived at my belief via a conscious, or a consciously available, inferential process.

To bring home the point, consider *Y*’s coming to believe that *X* is in his office, on the basis of seeing that the lights are on, where *Y* is professor *X*’s three-year-old daughter. I take it that *Y* may be warranted in believing that *X* is in his office, on this basis, but surely there is no reflec-

27. In presenting Burge’s argument, I have written as if the object of the recipient’s first entitlement is the belief that her source said that *p*. This seems the most natural way to read the argument, but it is not essential. The core of the argument remains the same even on other readings. Suppose that the object of the entitlement is simply the belief that *p*. (I discuss this option in section 5.) By Burge’s criteria, perception does not play an epistemic role in the formation of that belief either: the belief that *p* is not about words (except in the special case where the testimonial knowledge in question is metalinguistic, but that is irrelevant), and there is no reflectively accessible mental process from perceptions of words to this belief. Likewise if the entitlement attaches to the belief that “it is said that *p*” (see section 4), or if the entitlement is only a conditional entitlement to the resultant belief (see section 5)—whether that belief is the belief that one’s source said that *p*, the belief that *p* (or the belief that it is said that *p*).

28. Stephen Schiffer (2001) makes essentially this point (although he just considers Burge’s first criterion). See also Christensen and Kornblith 1997, 10–12.

tively accessible inference of the appropriate form going on in *Y*. It might be objected that what is or is not going on in *Y* is irrelevant, since mature epistemic agents have warrants at their disposal that are not available to young children. (“And are we not primarily concerned with *our* warrants?”) True; but, first, my immediate aim is just to show that Burge’s criteria fail to capture all kinds of perceptual warrant; and to show that, it is enough to point out that *Y* may have *some* warrant for believing that *X* is in his office—one that stems (at least in part) from her seeing that the lights are on. It does not matter whether her warrant is the warrant we would have in those circumstances. (The situation is different if *Y* at most has warrant “by courtesy,” but I do not think that this is the right thing to say about children.)

Second, it seems plausible that *we too*, mature and sophisticated epistemic agents, are very often in *Y*’s predicament.²⁹ It seems that, in many cases, we too lack reflective access to any mental process of suitable form. The average epistemic agent can certainly not be expected to be able to articulate the factors that explain why she judged that *p* (say, that Australia won the U.S. Open) rather than that *q* (say, that the U.K. won and the local Aussie beerhouse has been taken over by Brits)—indeed, *philosophers* have a hard time articulating those factors—nor can she be expected to be able to recognize a correct account of those factors if presented with it. But we do not take that to show that she does not have a perceptual warrant for believing that Australia won the U.S. Open, a warrant (somehow) provided by her hearing that primeval cries are coming from the local Aussie beerhouse.

Of course, reflective (and conscious) accessibility comes in degrees, and if we render the notion sufficiently weak—for example, if we only require that the agent have reflective access in ideal circumstances—then perhaps the claim that she has access to some suitable inference can be made good. However, if we water down the notion this much, it is no longer clear that the recipient of testimony does *not* have reflective access to the details of the process that takes her from perceptions of words to a belief about content. Burge’s argument gains its plausibility from play with a notion of access to “ordinary reflection” (see section 2). We can agree with him that, in *that* sense of access, the recipient does not have access to any such process. But once we replace that notion with a much

29. Compare Schiffer 2001, 12: “what is true of the child is true of most adults, or else we have very little [perceptually based] knowledge.”

weaker one—for example, access in ideal circumstances—it is no longer so clear that she does not. In brief, I doubt that the relevant idealization can be specified in a way that yields the desired result (barring whatever-it-takes specifications).³⁰

To sum up, there is a class of beliefs—and a large class at that³¹—that intuitively counts as perceptually warranted, but that are not captured by either of Burge’s criteria. And, for all Burge says, our beliefs about what is said belong to this class. Now, I do not mean to suggest, implausibly, that all the beliefs that belong to this class have the same epistemology.³² All I am doing is pointing out that Burge has a *very weak* case for the view that perception plays a merely causal role vis-à-vis the first entitlement. Burge offers two criteria for when a belief counts as perceptually warranted, and he argues that neither criterion is met in the case at hand. But there are plenty of everyday counterexamples to the claim that those criteria capture *all* kinds of perceptually warranted belief—which claim must be true for the strategy to work.

4. A Warrant For What?

So far, I have responded to Burge’s argument for the claim that “the entitlement to rely on understanding” is *a priori*. In this and the following section, I am going to argue directly against the plausibility of that claim. I will consider in more detail what this entitlement could be an entitlement *for*, or an entitlement to *do*, and argue that there is no plausible answer to this question available to Burge that also allows him to reach his controversial conclusion about knowledge by testimony.

It is time, then, to scrutinize our working assumption that the relevant entitlement is an entitlement to believe that one’s source said that *p*. (One of the results reached below is that Burge cannot in fact avail himself of this assumption.) My strategy will be both to consider what

30. For an interesting discussion of a related point, see Davies 1989, 136–39.

31. Note that the class includes everything that Fred Dretske (1995) classifies as “secondary epistemic seeing,” and more. (For example, my knowing that the avocado is overripe, on the basis of tasting that it has a foul taste, or my learning the time by looking at a clock [the latter example is due to Christensen and Kornblith 1997].)

32. For one thing, some of those beliefs may have an inferential, whereas others have a noninferential, epistemology. I want to leave open to which category beliefs about what is said belong. (See Recanati 2002 for an illuminating discussion.) But note that noninferentialism does not commit one to the view that the warrant is *a priori*. (On this point, see Christensen and Kornblith 1997, 9–11.)

Burge actually says about the entitlement, and to assess some alternative suggestions made on his behalf. Since none of my arguments turn on it being an entitlement in Burge's technical sense, I will often simply use the term 'warrant'.

So, what is the warrant in question—the recipient's first default entitlement—a warrant to do? Or, more to the point, what is Burge's answer to this question? Burge is quite unclear on this, and so we have to do some exegesis. For one thing, he uses a number of different phrases to refer to the warrant at issue, which phrases could be interpreted to mean quite different things.³³ Here, as before, I will simply focus on the (frequently occurring) locution "entitlement to rely on understanding" and try to make good sense of that.

First, let us get clear about what notion of understanding is at play. There are two candidates: understanding of a type of expression (say, a sentence type), and understanding of a particular, dated utterance. On the face of it, it is the latter that is of primary interest here: to gain knowledge (or even belief) by testimony, the recipient must grasp the proposition expressed by a particular utterance—the utterance made by her source at the occasion of the testimony. And it seems clear that this is the notion that Burge (1997, 21) has in mind: "if one lacks counter-considerations, and one has minimal level of conceptual know-how, one is entitled to rely on one's seeming understanding of *particular* putative assertions" (original emphasis).³⁴ Moreover, she must grasp the *force* of (the speech-act effected in) the utterance—its being an assertion. For Burge (1993, 481), this is part and parcel of utterance-understanding; the understanding of an utterance includes grasp of force: "Understanding content presupposes and is interdependent with understanding the force of presentations of content."

Second, what is it to *rely* on understanding (henceforth: grasp of an utterance's content and force)? On a natural reading, it is simply to use understanding as a way to form beliefs. But this reply is not particu-

33. For instance, he uses "entitlement to *understanding*," "entitlement to *rely* on understanding," "entitlement to rely on *seeming* or *putative* or *presumptive* understanding," "entitlement to understanding of *another's speech*," "entitlement to rely on one's seeming understanding of *what the person said*"; he also talks of "the *beliefs* to which we are entitled as a result of communication." See Burge 1993, 479, 484; 1997, 21–25; and 1999, 239, 242 (all italics mine).

34. See also Burge 1999, 243: "In certain circumstances, we can be a priori defeasibly entitled to comprehension of what others say *in particular cases*" (original emphasis).

larly informative—we also need to know *what* beliefs. What beliefs does understanding normally “deliver”? What beliefs do I acquire as a result of having understood my source’s utterance? Now, I think that we can all agree that—whatever understanding *is*, and whatever *other* beliefs, if any, it delivers—understanding normally delivers beliefs about *what the speaker said*,³⁵ or, for short, beliefs about *what is said*. (In fact, I think that we can all agree that it normally delivers *knowledge* of what is said, but let us bypass this for now.) This (first) point is meant to be uncontroversial. I am not saying that to understand an utterance *consists* in having a belief about what was said in it, nor am I saying that understanding may not deliver *further* beliefs. All I am saying is that understanding normally equips the subject with a (true) belief about what is said—more precisely, a (true) belief that so-and-so made such-and-such a speech-act, with such-and-such a content, at such-and-such a time. Everybody—Burge included—should, I think, agree on this. The further suggestion I am making is that to “rely on understanding,” in the sense of ‘reliance’ that is at issue here, just is to use understanding to form such beliefs: beliefs about what is said.³⁶

Third, if to rely on understanding is to use it as a way to form beliefs about what one’s source said, then, plausibly, to be *entitled* to rely on understanding is to be entitled to form such beliefs. We have finally arrived, then, at a candidate answer to the question with which we began: what is the warrant to rely on understanding a warrant to *do*? It is a warrant to form beliefs about what one’s source said.

35. Or asked, or commanded. I will omit this qualification below since our main concern is with sayings, that is, assertions.

36. On one view, to understand an utterance just is to know what was said in it (see Schiffer 1987). Your belief about what is said would then be constitutive of understanding, rather than a product of it. But Fricker (2003) gives convincing counterexamples to this view: I don’t speak Russian, but my multilingual companion tells me what our Russian host just said—through her testimony I come to know what was said, but I still don’t understand our host’s utterance. I can also understand without knowing what was said, due to misleading evidence about the etiology of the utterance. (See Fricker 2003 for details.) Hunter (1998) argues, in a similar way, that understanding does not require a justified belief, or even a mere belief, about what is said. Both Hunter and Fricker also defend a certain positive view of understanding: the view that understanding is a “quasi-perceptual” conscious state—a “quasi-perception” of the content and force of the utterance (see note 26). My discussion is compatible with that view of understanding, but it does not commit me to it.

But could this be what Burge has in mind, when he says that we are a priori entitled to rely on understanding? Well, there are two ways of reading our candidate answer. On the first, what it says is just that we are a priori entitled to make a *transition* from states of understanding to beliefs about what is said. This does not entail that we are also a priori entitled to each of the particular, resultant beliefs. (I will get back to this suggestion below—the suggestion that the warrant is a warrant to make a transition; see section 5.) On the second reading, it says that we *are* a priori entitled to each of the resultant beliefs. This, of course, is what we have so far taken Burge to be saying.

But, in fact, the second suggestion is highly implausible. It is highly implausible to say that I can have a priori/nonperceptual warrant for the belief that so-and-so said that such-and-such at a certain time. On the face of it, this is a *paradigm* case of a belief for which I can only have a posteriori warrant. And the absurdity is (in my view) not diminished by the fact that the warrant in question is only an entitlement, and a defeasible one at that. As mentioned earlier, Burge says some things that seem to suggest that this—the second suggestion—is in fact his view. But we should avoid ascribing a highly implausible view to him, if possible. And, fortunately, there is also some textual evidence to the contrary. For instance, in one of the places where the warrant in question is being discussed, he writes: “[w]hat one is entitled to on intellectual [that is, a priori] grounds is merely, *prima facie*, that a given content is presented as true. One gets nothing about the time, form, or circumstances of the assertion. All such information is epistemically grounded in perception of aspects of the context” (Burge 1993, 483).

However, it is still far from clear what Burge’s own view comes to. Judging from this passage, he *does* seem to hold that the relevant entitlement is not just an entitlement to make a transition, but an outright entitlement to *believe* something—although something *less specific* than, say, that *NN* said that *p* at *t*. We are a priori entitled to believe that “a given content is presented as true” (say, is asserted), where this is supposed to carry no commitment to the content’s being thus presented at any particular time or place, or by any particular person. We are a priori entitled to believe that it is said that *p*—period.

But whether or not this is in fact Burge’s view, I do not think that it can help him. Let us grant that we, normal recipients of testimony, do in fact have “non-committal” beliefs of the relevant sort. (As long as it is recognized that they are in most cases *tacit*—just as our more specific beliefs

about what is said are in most cases tacit³⁷—this idea does not seem too problematic.) Suppose, further, that we have warrant for them. Is this warrant *a priori* warrant? It does not seem plausible to suppose that it is. Presumably, those beliefs typically rest—in both the psychological and epistemic sense of ‘rest’—on beliefs about what is said of the more specific type. But if that is correct, then the less specific beliefs are *not* a priori warranted, since the more specific beliefs are not a priori warranted.³⁸

Indeed, how *could* the less specific beliefs be a priori warranted? The proposition that it is said that *p* is highly contingent (just like the proposition that *NN* said that *p* at *t* is highly contingent). Arguably, there are a few examples of the contingent a priori. Perhaps I can know a priori that I am here now; and perhaps, if I stipulate that ‘Julius’ is to refer to the inventor of the zipper, I can know a priori that, if anyone uniquely invented the zipper, then Julius invented the zipper.³⁹ But these examples are at best rare exceptions, exceptions that, on the face of it, have little in common with the case at hand. And the *explanation(s)* of how the contingent propositions in these examples can be known a priori do not seem to carry over. We cannot explain my allegedly a priori warrant for believing that it is said that *p* with appeal to the peculiarities of indexicals or of reference-fixing stipulations. How then *do* we explain it?

The complaint here is not that we lack a completely satisfactory theory of how this belief could be a priori warranted. The complaint is that we do not even know how to *begin* to explain it. How could the recipient of testimony possibly have a priori warrant for believing that someone, anyone, ever said that *p*? (For instance, for believing that someone, anyone, ever said that there are five kangaroos in John’s swimming pool, or, for that matter, for believing that someone, anyone, ever said that $2 + 2 = 4$.) Burge’s claim that the warrant in question, the warrant

37. By calling these beliefs “tacit,” I do not mean that they are merely dispositional. I just mean that they are not (usually) conscious (and I take no stand on whether they always can be brought to consciousness).

38. To illustrate: suppose that you utter the sentence “It is raining.” Here is something I do believe, and believe as a direct result of hearing and understanding your utterance: you (now) said that it is raining. From this I can validly infer *that it is said that it is raining*—period (just as I can validly infer that *someone* sneezed, from the belief that *you* sneezed). In this little story, however, my warrant for believing that it is said that it is raining is clearly a posteriori, since it is *inferred* from a belief—the belief that you now said that it is raining—which can only be warranted a posteriori.

39. See Evans 1985 [1979] and Kripke 1980. More controversial examples include the negation of certain skeptical hypotheses; see Hawthorne 2002, and section 5 below. But these examples too fail to provide a good model for Burge’s example.

to rely on understanding, derives from “the reliability of our linguistic competence” does not, on its own, shed any light on this.⁴⁰

The general problem—the problem facing any candidate explanation—can be put in the form of a dilemma. Either my warrant for believing that it is said that *p* rests on a warrant for believing that some *particular* assertion that *p* is or has been performed, or it rests on purely general grounds. But I cannot establish a priori that any particular assertion is or has been performed (discounting my own assertions).⁴¹ And it is not even remotely plausible to suggest that there are a priori, general grounds for believing that it is said that *p* (for any proposition *p* that can be known by testimony).

5. Remaining Options

What options does Burge have left? There seem to be two alternatives. He could say that the relevant entitlement (the entitlement to rely on understanding) is, after all, an outright entitlement to form a certain belief—

40. Burge does see the need for a further explanation, and he gestures at one. He argues that the understanding of content is sometimes “intellectual”—that provided the utterance contains no context-sensitive expressions, I can identify its content just by drawing on my narrowly semantic competence (my knowledge of the meanings of expression-types); in particular, without relying on contextual clues or on evidence pertaining to the speaker’s intentions (Burge 1997, 21–22; 1999, 233–36). He also claims that there is a “conceptual connection” between assertive force and indicative mood, which renders assertion the default use of indicative sentences (Burge 1993, 482). These two considerations, properly spelled out, are supposed to account for my a priori warrant to believe that it is said that *p*. But this looks like a nonstarter. It is debatable whether the content (and/or force) of an utterance can ever be identified without reliance on the extralinguistic context (see Grice 1989; Sperber and Wilson 1991; Bezuidenhout 1998; Stanley 1999; Recanati 2002). But even if it can, that is *compatible* with saying that beliefs about what is said (specific and general) can only be a posteriori warranted. To *apply* my (narrowly) semantic competence, in any particular case, I must hear or see the utterance, and it is very plausible that my perception of the utterance plays an epistemic role in the formation of my belief about what is said. (Burge, of course, holds that my perception of the utterance is not epistemically significant, but the only reason he gives for thinking so is the argument that we reviewed in sections 2–3 above.) In short, it seems to me that the most Burge’s purported explanation shows is that I can be entitled to move straight from a representation of an utterance to a belief about what is said. But that does not help. Since my representation of the utterance is inevitably going to be *perceptual*, the belief that I gain as a result of this move is inevitably going to be a posteriori (compare section 5).

41. Perhaps I can know a priori that *I* said that *p* at *t* (barring worries relating to content externalism). But that is irrelevant. Burge owes us an explanation of how, *qua recipient of testimony*, I can be a priori entitled to believe that it is said that *p*. It

only, we have not yet identified the right belief—or that it is an entitlement to make a transition. Let us explore these options in turn.⁴²

What about the suggestion that it is simply an entitlement to believe the proposition presented as true by the source—the proposition that *p*? On this view, the entitlement to rely on understanding, *as well as* the entitlement to rely on the rationality of one's source, is an entitlement to believe that *p*. This is a coherent possibility. There could be two entitlements involved in testimony—entitlements with different *sources*—even though what they are entitlements to believe is the same. However, it is clearly not Burge's view, as stated in the work(s) under consideration. If it were, it would be hard to make sense of the numerous passages in which he writes as if the two entitlements are indeed entitlements to believe (or do) different things (see, for instance, Burge 1993, 484; 1997, 21–22, 28). It would also be hard to make sense of his claim that both entitlements must be in place for the recipient to have knowledge by testimony.⁴³ But *could* Burge perhaps hold this view? Perhaps it is compatible with the core of his position, and perhaps it is also a plausible view? Let us evaluate it, then, not as an interpretation, but as a suggestion on his behalf.

One might think that it is not compatible with one of Burge's core claims—the claim that certain processes are “purely preservative” (see section 1). The current suggestion entails, in Jim Edwards's phrase, that testimony can *generate* warrants (Edwards 2000), but was not Burge's core idea that testimony merely functions to *preserve* already existing warrants? The suggestion is that the recipient's first default warrant is a warrant to believe the proposition her source presents as true. But if Burge endorsed this suggestion, he would be committed to saying that one can have (a priori) warrant for believing that *p* by testimony even in cases in which one's *source* has no warrant (a priori or otherwise) for believing that *p*.

would be peculiar—to say the least—if knowledge by testimony bottomed out in self-knowledge.

42. This is the place to mention, and set aside, an option that is not considered in the text. In some places Burge writes as if the relevant entitlement is an entitlement to believe *that one has understood* (one's source's utterance). But I doubt that anyone (least of all Burge) would be tempted to say that knowledge by testimony—as opposed to knowledge *that one knows* by testimony—requires warrant to believe that one has understood one's source's utterance.

43. Given that he holds that an undefeated entitlement is often sufficient for knowledge (Burge 1993, 485).

In fact, Burge is independently committed to this consequence, since he no doubt holds that the recipient's *second* default warrant is a warrant to believe that *p*. This leads Edwards to propose a revision of Burge's view (to the effect that the recipient's second warrant is parasitic on the source's warrant). But this is unnecessary, since there is no incompatibility to start with. *Pace* Edwards, Burge does not hold that the testimonial process *as a whole* is purely preservative. The crucial claim is that the function of *perception* in testimony is purely preservative (this must—at least sometimes—be the case if testimony is ever to yield a priori warranted belief). Burge does say that *knowledge* by testimony also requires a warrant on the part of the source—that is, that knowledge by testimony requires that a warrant, as opposed to just (the content and force of) a belief, be preserved in testimony. But warranted belief by testimony does not (see Burge 1993, 485–86; 1997, 44 n. 2).⁴⁴

Moreover, there seems to be nothing problematic about this idea. It is perfectly plausible to suppose that you can sometimes have warrant for a belief received through testimony even though your source lacks warrant for it. After all, you have been *told* that *p*, whereas she has not. So you have at least *some* reason to believe that *p*, whereas she, we may suppose, has none.⁴⁵ If it were only for the fact, then, that testimony can generate warrant, the current suggestion would be a viable option for Burge.

However, it is hard to see how *the reliability of your linguistic competence* could make you warranted in believing the content of an arbitrary utterance (compare section 2). Furthermore, the entitlement to rely on understanding is supposed to be *a priori*. On the current conception of its object, this implies that you can have a priori warrant for a testimonial belief even in cases where your source has only a posteriori warrant

44. I should admit that there is some unclarity on this point in other places, which might have misled Edwards. But it is hard to see why Burge *would* deny that testimony can generate warrant. On his view, the recipient's overall warrant is a compound, made up of her own a priori entitlements, plus (in the case where she knows) of her source's warrant. Why could she not have the first two entitlements even when she lacks the third? After all, those entitlements are independently explained—they are not explained as somehow deriving from the source's warrant.

45. This is only the beginning of the story, but the story can be filled out in various ways. Note that the *nature* of your reason is left open—your reason may be that the source said that *p*, but there are other options. The crucial point is that in being told that *p*, you gain some warrant to believe that *p*, whereas, by hypothesis, your source lacks warrant (perhaps she believes that *p* as a result of a blind guess, or perhaps she is even lying). This may well preclude your belief from being *knowledge*, but it does not seem to preclude it from being warranted.

for it—indeed, even in cases where the only warrant *available* to her is a posteriori. Of course, Burge is independently committed to this consequence too, since the *second* entitlement is also supposed to be a priori.⁴⁶ But this does not make it less hard to swallow. It strikes me as completely absurd to say that, qua recipient of testimony, you can have a priori warrant for, say, the belief that it is raining. This is another paradigm case of a belief for which you can only have a posteriori warrant.

It might be replied that the *defeasibility* of the recipient's entitlement(s) ensures that we cannot be a priori entitled to hold any such beliefs. All actual and possible a priori entitlements to believe that it is raining are “cancelled” by defeating conditions. However, it seems all too easy to construct cases in which the recipient's warrant remains undefeated. Suppose John tells you that it is raining. Suppose furthermore that you have no reason to distrust him, no reason to distrust your senses, no reason to believe that you failed to understand his utterance (and so on). On the current view, are we not committed to saying that you have a priori warrant for the belief that it is raining? Surely this is absurd.⁴⁷

Burge's last option is to say that what the a priori entitlement to rely on understanding entitles you to do is just to make a *transition*—a transition from your understanding of an utterance to a belief. A warrant to make a transition does not ensure a warrant for the resultant belief. Rather, it is a *conditional* warrant for that belief—if the transition proceeds from an appropriate starting point (say, another warranted belief) and all else is equal, then the transition results in a warranted belief.

But what is it for such a warrant to be a priori? Christopher Peacocke (2005, 744), who makes ample use of the notion of an a priori entitled transition, explains the idea as follows: “We can ask whether, given that a thinker is in a certain state *S*, he is justified or entitled in judging that *p* without further reliance on the content or kind of his perceptual states beyond those included in *S*.”⁴⁸ If the answer is ‘yes’, the thinker is a priori entitled to move from *S* to the belief that *p*; otherwise, he is not. Note that the nature of the initial state *S* is left open—it may be, say, a

46. And in one place he seems to explicitly endorse it; see Burge 1997, 44 n. 2.

47. Arguably, the absurdity does not stop here. It seems that *John* could later gain a priori warrant by *your* testimony to believe that it is (or was) raining (provided he forgets that he originally told you). This would be akin to what John MacFarlane (2005) calls “knowledge laundering.”

48. See also Peacocke 2004, chaps. 1 and 6.

single perception, or a set of beliefs. Hence we can ask Peacocke's question about any mental transition (inference or perception-to-belief transition; simple or complex). What we end up with is a distinction between transitions that can equip a subject with a warranted end belief, independently of her having any (further) perceptions or perceptual beliefs, and transitions that can only equip her with that if she has certain (further) perceptions or perceptual beliefs.

This distinction crosscuts another, and more familiar, distinction in epistemology: the distinction between transitions that, *as they stand*, can equip a subject with a warranted end belief, and transitions that can only do that if the subject has certain further perceptions or beliefs—perceptual or nonperceptual (see, for example, Pryor 2004 and Wright 2002).⁴⁹ Let us say that transitions of the former sort are *self-sufficient*, whereas transitions of the latter sort are not.⁵⁰ This seems to me a more natural way of carving logical space, but we can understand the above distinction in terms of it: a warrant to make a transition is a priori if and only if, *either* the transition is self-sufficient, *or* it is not self-sufficient but the requisite additional states or beliefs are not perceptual. To illustrate the latter possibility, consider the transition from its visually seeming to me that I have hands to the belief that I have hands. According to “conservative” views of perceptual warrant, this transition is not self-sufficient—it must be supplemented by a warranted belief (for example, that my eyes function properly, or that I am not radically deceived). But some conservatives hold that we can have a priori/nonperceptual warrant for the supplementary belief (Wright [2002] and White [forthcoming] are examples of such conservatives), and if they are right, my warrant to make the transition is still a priori.

However, insofar as Burge holds that the warrant to rely on understanding is a warrant to make a transition (from understanding to belief),

49. This distinction is usually introduced at the level of justifications or warrants, not at the level of transitions among mental states. But nothing of importance to our concerns hinges on this.

50. Uncontroversial examples include the transition from the belief that John is hiking in the Swiss Alps to the belief that John is hiking (self-sufficient), and the transition from the belief that John is hiking in the Swiss Alps to the belief that John is getting a lot of fresh air (not self-sufficient). Controversial examples include the transition from its seeming to me that I have hands to the belief that I have hands, and the transition from the belief that all observed *F*s are *G*s to the belief that all *F*s are *G*s. A “liberal” about these transitions holds that they are self-sufficient too, whereas a “conservative” denies it. (This terminology is due to Pryor 2004.)

he clearly holds that this warrant is a priori in the first sense: in virtue of the transition's being self-sufficient. (He repeatedly insists that the entitlement to rely on understanding is "non-inferential" and "epistemically immediate" (see, for example, Burge 1997, 30; 1999, 237).) But could this really be *all* that Burge means by saying that the entitlement is a priori? If it is, one might wonder why he did not make that clear, and why he considers himself entitled to such radical conclusions. This suggests that the last option too is best seen as a suggestion on Burge's behalf.⁵¹ Let us evaluate it as such.

Suppose, then, that the entitlement to rely on understanding is an entitlement to make a transition. What is it a transition *to*?⁵² There are two ways to go here: either the resultant belief—the belief that the transition is a transition to—is a belief about what is said, or it is a belief in the proposition your source presents as true. The problem with the first way should however be obvious. As argued earlier, a belief about what is said (general or specific) can only be a posteriori warranted. The current suggestion is compatible with that, since it only says that you have a priori warrant to make the transition. That is compatible with the a posteriori status of the end belief. But it seems that we have made *very little progress*—with respect to the aim of showing that we can have a priori knowledge (and warranted belief) by testimony—if all we have argued is that the first warrant involved in testimony is a warrant to move to a belief about what is said. Since we cannot have outright a priori warrant to that belief, how does it *help* Burge's ultimate cause that the transition to *it* is a priori?

A better option, then, might be to say that the resultant belief—the belief that the transition is a transition to—is your belief in the asserted proposition. Unlike the view discussed at the beginning of this section,

51. Here is a further reason to think so. Burge claims that a priori warranted testimonial belief (and a priori testimonial knowledge) is only possible in cases that do not involve the use of any context-sensitive expressions. But he also claims that the *entitlement to rely on understanding* is only a priori in such cases (Burge 1997, 22). It is unclear why he would say this, if he held that the entitlement is just an entitlement to make a transition—as should be clear, you can be a priori entitled to make a transition from (or to) a given state even in cases where the state itself is such that, to be in that state, you must possess a certain a posteriori warrant. All Burge needs to say is that we are not, in such cases, a priori entitled to the resultant belief.

52. I will assume that what it is a transition *from* is the state of understanding (of one's source's utterance). The only feasible rival candidate is the perception of her utterance, but since this is such an obvious nonstarter for Burge, I will not discuss it.

this view does not have the unacceptable consequence that all warranted testimonial beliefs are a priori warranted. Indeed, as it stands, it leaves it entirely open whether *any* such beliefs are a priori warranted. This, however, may invite a worry similar to that just raised above: does the view give Burge what he wants? Does it suffice for his purposes? If the claim that we are a priori warranted to make the transition leaves it entirely open whether we are a priori warranted to hold the resultant testimonial beliefs, does it take us any closer toward showing that our testimonial beliefs are sometimes a priori warranted?

Yes, it does—*provided* Burge can show that the state of understanding from which the transition proceeds does not involve or require a perceptual warrant (or is itself perceptual).⁵³ This would suffice since, other things being equal, an a priori warranted transition from an a priori starting point results in an a priori warranted end belief. Now, Burge does claim that understanding is sometimes “intellectual”—that is, that the state of understanding is sometimes independent of perception in the sense relevant to questions of warrant.⁵⁴ (It “does not require . . . perceptual warrant for the application of what is understood” [Burge 1997, 21].) It is hard to assess this claim without going further into the question of what understanding is—how the notion of (utterance) understanding is to be explicated. And I cannot go into a discussion of that complex issue here. What I propose to do, however, is to point out a *principled* difficulty facing Burge at this point.

Burge does not say how he conceives of understanding. But note that *whatever* conception of understanding he favors, he faces a formidably difficult task. He must show that understanding is “intellectual”—in all and *only* those cases in which the content of the understood utterance can plausibly be the content of an a priori warranted belief. Otherwise, we again reach the result that the recipient of testimony can have a priori warrant for beliefs for which her source only has (indeed, only *can* have) a posteriori warrant. It is one thing to say that we can have a priori warrant for, say, mathematical beliefs received by testimony—I do not find

53. In the narrow sense of ‘perception’ that Burge is working with. (See section 1.)

54. More precisely, he argues that we can sometimes identify the content and force of an utterance just in virtue of our narrowly semantic competence (see note 40). As I argued above, this is in fact compatible with saying that a belief about what is said can only be a posteriori. It is also compatible with saying that the state of understanding requires a perceptual warrant. (Trivially so, of course, if understanding just is a belief about what is said.) But, for the sake of argument, we may suppose that there is a way of explicating intellectual understanding that is more congenial to the current proposal.

this plausible, but it may not be absurd. It is another thing entirely to say that we can have a priori warrant for beliefs such as the belief that it is raining.

Burge gives us one restriction: he says that understanding is intellectual only in cases where no context-sensitive devices are used. Perhaps this rules out the possibility of the recipient having a priori warrant for the belief that it is raining (since, arguably, any particular proposition expressed by the sentence “it is raining” contains an indexical). But it does not rule out the possibility of her having a priori warrant for the belief that it is raining in New York City at 3:48 p.m. on October 1, 1976, or that tomatoes grow on vines, or (to take an example of Burge’s) that zebras are larger than red poppies. And, importantly, it is very hard to see *how to defend* a restriction of the sort Burge needs. How could it be that my understanding of an utterance of “tomatoes grow on vines” requires that I have some perceptual warrant, but that my understanding of an utterance of “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” does not? It seems highly implausible that the epistemology of understanding differs in this way, depending on the content of the understood utterance.

6. The Role of Knowledge of What Is Said

I have considered a number of possible views on what the a priori entitlement to rely on understanding that Burge postulates could be an entitlement to do, and I have pressed separate charges against each of them. (It also seems that the views I have discussed exhaust the options.) I shall now raise a more general problem—a problem that arises regardless of how the a priori entitlement in question is cashed out. The problem is that Burge cannot accommodate the intuition that knowledge of what is said (in the specific sense) plays an epistemic role in the acquisition of knowledge by testimony. Let me explain.

I claimed in passing earlier that if a subject understands an utterance, then she normally does not just believe but *knows* what is (or was) said in it. I take it that Burge would agree with this, that is, that he would agree that competent speakers normally know what other speakers of their language are saying. But if—as I argued earlier—it is highly implausible to say that you can have a priori warrant for a belief about what is said, then it is of course also highly implausible to say that you can have a priori warrant *of a strength sufficient for knowledge* for a belief about what is said. It seems, then, that knowledge of what is said must be a posteriori. But now, consider: if knowledge of what is said must be

a posteriori, and if such knowledge plays an epistemic role in the formation of knowledge by testimony, does it not follow that knowledge by testimony too must be a posteriori?

Well, perhaps it does not *follow*; perhaps there exists some kind of epistemic role that would allow for “failures of transmission” of the a posteriori status of the one piece of knowledge to the other.⁵⁵ But it is hard to see what that role would be. What I think that Burge would say is that knowledge of what is said plays no epistemic role at all, but that, just like perception of words, it plays a *merely causal role* in the acquisition of knowledge by testimony.⁵⁶

However, the following consideration gives us a *prima facie* reason to think that it plays an epistemic role: suppose John tells me that it is raining, and that I thereby come to know that it is raining—that is, suppose that I gain knowledge by (John’s) testimony that it is raining. If you asked me *how* I know that it is raining, then presumably part of my (pretheoretical) answer would be: “John told me,” “John said so,” or “John said that it is raining.” Here is a natural thought about *what I am doing* in giving this answer: I am citing part of my (epistemic) *reason* for believing that it is raining, part of what makes me *warranted* in believing that this is the case. What my answer brings out is that part of my reason for believing that it is raining is that John said so. But that is just to say that my warranted (or knowledgeable) belief about what John said plays an epistemic role in the formation of my knowledge that it is raining.

It might be objected that, on an equally natural interpretation, I am simply citing one of the *causes* of my coming to know that it is raining. After all, the question “how do you know that *p*?” is ambiguous between “what *is* your warrant for believing that *p*?” and “how did you *access* that warrant?” And my answer can be read as an answer to the question taken either way. To illustrate, suppose that John shows me a proof of a mathematical theorem, *T*, that I work through the proof, and that I come to know *T* as a result. If you asked me “How do you know *T*?” I might well reply “I saw a proof of *T*,” or “John showed me a proof of *T*.” In this case, however, there is no plausibility at all to the suggestion that what I am doing is citing one of my reasons for believing *T*. My reasons for believ-

55. The term ‘transmission-failure’ is usually used about transmission of warrant, but, as should be clear, I use it here about transmission of the *status* of a warrant.

56. On standard assumptions, this is elliptical for saying that a *belief* about what is said plays a causal role in the acquisition of *belief* by testimony (but see Williamson 2000).

ing T are stated in the proof that I worked through. Still, my answer is perfectly adequate as an answer to your question read the second way: what enabled me to access the warrant I have to believe T is that I saw a proof of T /that John showed me a proof of T . So charity dictates that this is how we should read my answer. But then, why not read my answer in the previous case—that involving testimony—in the same way?⁵⁷

In reply, we can modify the case involving testimony slightly: suppose that you made it completely clear that you intended the first reading of “how do you know?” (A simple way would be to ask, instead, “what is your *justification*?”) Part of my reply would *still* be that John said that it is raining. Note that the corresponding modification of the case involving mathematics does not yield the same result; here, if you made it clear that you were asking for my warrant, I would start rehearsing the details of the proof.

But, arguably, ordinary people are not authoritative about the epistemic grounds of their beliefs. And so the most the example shows—even after the suggested modification—is that there is a *default presumption* to the effect that knowledge of what is said plays an epistemic role in the formation of knowledge by testimony. However, we can bolster the case for this presumption. In section 7, I will give a theoretical consideration in support of it. Then, in section 8, I will suggest a way in which to cash it out—that is, I will outline an account of knowledge by testimony that (unlike Burge’s) accords with the presumption, an account that I find independently plausible.⁵⁸

7. Deviant Causal Chains

If we deny the presumption, we end up with a rather curious picture of the recipient’s motivational psychology. To see why, let us consider what, more specifically, it could mean to say that your knowledge of what is said does not play an epistemic role in your acquisition of knowledge by testimony. One thing it could mean is that your knowledge that NN said that p does not even provide you with *a* reason for believing that p , that is, that the proposition that NN said that p does not stand in a rationally

57. Chris Peacocke put this objection to me.

58. Note that there is no even remotely plausible way in which to cash out the corresponding claim about the case involving mathematics, that is, no even remotely plausible epistemology of mathematics according to which my perception of the proof of T , or John’s showing me a proof, plays an epistemic role in my coming to know T .

supporting or warranting—say, a probabilifying—relationship to the proposition that *p*. (On the probability interpretation: that the truth of the first proposition does not raise the subjective probability of the truth of the second to more than a marginal degree.) But this cannot be what Burge has in mind. Surely a warranting relationship obtains between the two propositions—even Burge should agree with that. Here is another way of putting the point: even Burge should agree that it is possible to *reconstruct* a route *R* from your belief that *NN* said that *p* to your belief that *p* such that, if you *were* to take *R*, you would be warranted in believing that *p*.⁵⁹ To deny that your knowledge of what is said gives you *a* reason to deny that such a “rational reconstruction” is possible.

Another thing it could mean is that your knowledge that *NN* said that *p* does not provide (part of) *your* reason, or your *operative* reason, for believing that *p*. It is not (part of) the reason *for which* you believe that *p*. Now, it is highly unclear what conditions must be met in order for a content—say, the proposition that *q*—to be your operative reason for believing that *p*. A common suggestion, however, is that you must at least believe that *q*, and that your coming to believe that *p* must be *caused* in part by your belief that *q*.⁶⁰ Perhaps you must also view the proposition that *q* as a reason for believing that *p*, or (in some other way) acknowledge that the move from the belief that *q* to the belief that *p* is a rational move (see, for instance, Brewer 1995). It does not matter for our purposes what the exact conditions are. It is enough that the phenomenon is real—that there is such a thing as a proposition’s being *your* reason. I suggest that what Burge has in mind is that your knowledge that *NN* said that *p* does not provide *your* reason for believing that *p*. This seems to me the most plausible reading of the claim under consideration.

If it is right that causality is required, for a proposition to be *your* reason, then one way in which your knowledge that *NN* said that *p* could fail to provide your reason is by failing to cause you to form the belief

59. Burge concedes this in Burge 1993, 484.

60. The *locus classicus* is Davidson 1980 [1963]. For Davidson, only beliefs can provide (operative) reasons. I think that other mental states—for example, certain perceptual states—can provide reasons too, but, for ease of exposition, I will write as if Davidson is right here. It is unclear whether the relevant causal requirement is best understood in terms of “dynamic” or “sustaining” causation (see note 20). For brevity, I will write in terms of dynamic causation, but my argument does not depend on this. (In particular, we can draw the deviant/nondeviant distinction among sustaining conditions too.)

that *p*. However, according to (the view I have attributed to) Burge, your knowledge of what is said *is* a cause of your coming to believe that *p*.⁶¹ The idea, then, seems to be that the case at hand is an instance of (what we might call) “reason-independent causation”—that is, a case in which an agent *A* Φ ’s (in part) because she has a certain belief *B*, *B* provides *a* reason for Φ -ing, but *B* does not give one of *A*’s reasons for Φ -ing. The prime example of such a case is Davidson’s climber. Davidson (1980 [1963], 79) writes: “a climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that [he did not loosen it] intentionally.” In this example, although the climber’s belief that if he loosens the hold, he could rid himself of the danger causes him to loosen his hold, it does not provide one of his (practical) reasons for doing so. The current idea is that, analogously, your belief that *NN* said that *p* causes you to form the belief that *p*, but it does not provide one of your (epistemic) reasons for believing that *p*.

The fact that Davidson’s example concerns reasons for action does not render the comparison inapt. Parallel cases—cases of reason-independent causation—involving reasons for belief can easily be constructed. For instance, suppose that you know that there are seven boys in a room, and that a hypnotist brings it about that whatever the content of your next belief is, that belief will produce in you the belief that there are twelve children in the room. Suppose that, as it happens, your next belief is the belief that there are five girls in the room, and that you form the belief that there are twelve children in the room as a result. Intuitively, that there are five girls in the room is not among your reasons for believing that there are twelve children in the room—even though the belief that there are (five girls in the room) both causes you to form the latter belief and provides *a* reason for holding that belief.⁶²

Still, I think that the suggestion is inadequate. The case of the hypnotized believer and the case of the climber are clearly cases in which something has gone wrong. The causal chain between the belief that does

61. The alternative is truly bizarre. The alternative would be to say that there are two distinct causal links from your understanding of the utterance—one to the belief that *NN* said that *p*, and one straight to the belief that *p*.

62. The example is from Lennon 1990, quoted in Brewer 1995.

the causing and the belief (or movement) that results is somehow non-standard or deviant—it is not the normal causal chain by which beliefs of the first type cause beliefs of the second type (or cause such movements). In each example, there is a quirk in the chain—the interference by a hypnotist and by a nervous fit, respectively—without which the belief would not, in the example as described, have had the effect it has. As the examples show, such cases are possible. But the suggestion that our everyday testimonial knowledge is typically arrived at in this way—that is, via some “quirky” causal chain—strikes me as very odd. For the suggestion to have even minimal plausibility, the supposed nonstandard causal chain would have to be described in some detail. We need to be told *by what mechanism* your belief that *NN* said that *p* causes you to come to believe that *p*, without also giving you one of your operative reasons for believing that *p*. Are you (too) in the hands of a powerful hypnotist, or do you perhaps arrive at your testimonial beliefs by means of some lunatic process of association? Both proposals seem wildly implausible, and it is hard to see how a better proposal would go.⁶³

Of course, the situation is even worse if this is the *only* way such knowledge can be arrived at. But (the acquisition of) knowledge by testimony arguably *requires* knowledge of what is said, or at least a warranted belief about what is said.⁶⁴ Unless I am warranted in believing that my source said that *p*, I cannot gain a warranted belief that *p*—hence cannot come to know that *p*—by testimony.⁶⁵ (Suppose that my belief that John said that *p* is the result of a random guess. Or suppose that I have misleading evidence that John’s utterance is in fact the output of a speech synthesizer. In either case, it seems that I cannot come to know that *p*

63. I am not suggesting that any state that is causally implicated, but not reason giving, in the acquisition of knowledge by testimony must involve causal deviance. Recall that the state must provide *a* reason. Knowledge of what is said does that.

64. Christensen and Kornblith (1997, 4) stress this point. See also Fricker 1994. Burge may in fact simply deny the intuition, and claim that knowledge by testimony does not require (specific) knowledge of what is said (see the example in Burge 1999, 244). But that does not affect the main argument in the text.

65. The claim is not that I must have a warranted belief that, say, *John* said that *p*. The acquisition of knowledge through history books refutes that suggestion. But I must think of my source under some mode of identification or other, and be warranted in believing that she or he said that *p*. (There may be some restrictions on the permissible modes of identification, but they certainly go beyond proper names.) Moreover, it is plausible that the requirement is conditional on the possession of metasemantic concepts (see note 79).

by John's testimony.)⁶⁶ If that is right, then the above line of reasoning commits Burge to saying that the only way we can gain knowledge by testimony is via a quirky causal chain.

8. Outline of an Alternative View

Let us turn to the alternative account of testimonial knowledge that I promised to outline. It is not the only account that accommodates the default presumption, but it seems to me the most plausible such account. The account has been properly elaborated and defended elsewhere, so I will only provide a rough sketch here. Elizabeth Fricker (1994), Peter Lipton (1998), and Stephen Schiffer (2001) all argue that knowledge by testimony is based on an inference to the best explanation. In brief, the recipient of testimony is seen as making an inference to the best explanation of why her source—say, John—said that *p*: she infers that John said that *p* in part because he believes that *p*, and she infers that John believes that *p* in part because *p* is the case. For the first step, she relies on her commonsense knowledge of why people typically say things. For the second step, she relies on her commonsense knowledge of why people typically believe things.

This sketch can be filled out in various ways, but we need not go into further detail for our purposes. On any way of filling it out, the proposition *that John said that p* is a crucial premise in the inference that provides the recipient with knowledge that *p*. Hence, unless the recipient knew (or at least had a warranted belief) that John said that *p*, she could not come to know that *p* in this way. Moreover, her knowledge that John said that *p* clearly plays an epistemic role in her coming to know that *p*: crudely speaking, the warrant she has for believing the conclusion of the inference is the sum of the warrant she has for believing each of its premises—including the premise that John said that *p*—together with the warrant she has for using abduction.

66. The second case is adapted from Fricker 2003. (Fricker uses it to argue that understanding is distinct from knowledge of what is said.) One might object that this case only shows that my warrant for a testimonial belief can be defeated (more precisely, undercut) by evidence that the belief was not produced in a reliable way. This objection raises tricky issues about the nature and explanation of defeaters that I cannot go into here. But, at any rate, the first case is not vulnerable to this objection, and I think that that case can be elaborated in a convincing way. (What we need is an example in which John did say that *p*, I heard and understood his utterance, but my belief that John said that *p* is not based on my perception or understanding of the utterance—it is just based on an unrelated hunch [and I have no particular reason to trust my hunches].)

Here, then, is an account that accommodates the default presumption. The account—henceforth “the IBE-account”—entails that knowledge by testimony cannot be a priori (if my warrant for believing at least one of the premises of an inference is a posteriori, my warrant for believing the conclusion must be a posteriori too). Burge would consequently not accept it. But on what grounds? How would he argue against it?

Burge does not discuss the IBE-account directly. But, in the course of arguing that the recipient’s second default entitlement is a priori, Burge (1993, 469) remarks that “we need not engage in reasoning about the person’s qualifications to be rational in accepting what he or she says, in the absence of grounds for doubt.” This is supposed to show that, to gain warranted belief by testimony, one need not rely on any (a posteriori) evidence pertaining to the trustworthiness of one’s particular source (that is, her sincerity and competence). The IBE-account, as outlined above, is in fact silent on whether one must have any positive evidence that a given source is sincere and competent, and if so, what it takes to gain such evidence (for instance, whether one must “engage in reasoning about the person’s qualifications”).⁶⁷ So Burge’s remark may not be to the point. But he might go on to complain that one need not “engage in reasoning” of *any* sort; in particular, one need not reason to the best explanation of why one’s source said that *p*.

Now, if ‘engage in reasoning’ just means ‘make an inference’ (a belief-to-belief transition), this complaint begs the question. If it means ‘conscious reasoning’, it does not beg the question; moreover, it seems to be true. The recipient of testimony need not engage in any conscious reasoning, or even any consciously accessible reasoning, about why her source said or believed that *p*. But all this shows is that the IBE-account is flawed *if* it purports to articulate a *justification* in Burge’s sense (see

67. All the account is explicitly committed to is that the recipient must be warranted in believing that her source is sincere and competent (on this occasion). It leaves open what is required to have warrant for those beliefs. Her knowledge of why people typically say things and typically believe things may often be enough, as long as she lacks evidence that the situation is *not* typical in either of these respects. (But it is plausible that the requirements go up as the complexity of the subject matter increases.) Both Fricker and Schiffer hold views of this kind. Alternatively, one might hold that some positive evidence that the source is trustworthy is always needed, but that in basic cases, the requisite evidence is very easy to come by. (For instance, that when asking a wristwatch-bearing stranger for the time, all I need is some evidence of minimal sanity and alertness on his or her part.)

sections 2–3). And we already know that not all warrant is justification in his sense. (More precisely, we already know that not all warrant is *either* justification *or* perceptual entitlement.⁶⁸ But the latter is obviously inapplicable here.)

However, there is in the literature a different objection, originally due to Tony Coady (1992, 119), against any inferentialist account of testimony, including the IBE-account.⁶⁹ As applied to that account, the objection runs (very roughly) as follows: knowledge by testimony cannot plausibly be seen as based on an inference to the best explanation, since not all the premises of an inference of that form can be known (or believed with adequate warrant) independently of testimony.⁷⁰ (This claim can be supported in different ways. For the way I prefer, see immediately below.) In general, if I already need some knowledge by testimony in order to run a certain inference, how could such knowledge be based on that inference? Answer: it cannot.

Which premise/which premises of the inference to the best explanation of John's saying that *p* is/are most plausibly seen as only knowable (or, at least, as typically known)⁷¹ by testimony? The recipient can know by her own accord that John said that *p*. But is she able to know, independently of testimony, that John said that *p* (in part) because John believes that *p*, and that John believes that *p* (in part) because *p* is the case? I said above that, in forming these two beliefs about John, the recipient relies on her "commonsense knowledge of why people typically say things, and her commonsense knowledge of why people typically believe things." And it seems plausible that *this* knowledge—her knowledge of certain principles of folk psychology—does, at least typically, depend on testimony.⁷² At any rate, this seems plausible if knowledge of these principles typically comes by way of knowledge of a more extended theory of per-

68. As that is explained in Burge's papers on testimony. See note 25.

69. But note that Tony Coady does not elaborate the objection in the way I do, and that it is presented as part of an argument against reductionism about testimony (Coady 1992, 3), not as part of an argument in support of Burge's thesis.

70. For the objection to get off the ground, "dependent" here must not be understood as merely causally dependent. I take it that what Coady has in mind is that *S*'s knowledge that *p* "depends" on testimony if and only if *S* knows that *p* (at least in part) by testimony.

71. Coady writes in terms of knowability but, in the current context, the weaker claim would suffice.

72. That it does is implicitly denied by Schiffer in his reply to Coady. See Schiffer 2001. Fricker, on the other hand, endorses something like this view in Fricker 1995.

sons. Presumably, such a theory is typically accepted in part on the basis of testimonial evidence. (This is not to say that the individual agent is *explicitly taught* this theory by others. The idea is just that others' testimony about what they—or yet others—desire, believe, say, and do serve as evidence on the basis of which she constructs the theory.) If this is correct, and if, as also seems plausible, she infers her two explanatory hypotheses about John from these folk-psychological principles, then the recipient who comes to know that *p* this way does not in fact do so independently of testimony.

But does this matter? I do not think so. Even if we grant Coady that our knowledge of commonsense psychology is (perhaps necessarily) testimony laden, his argument is of no great consequence. At most, it shows that not *all* knowledge by testimony is based on an inference to the best explanation; it does not, as he seems to think, show that *no* such knowledge is. Importantly, it is compatible with what Coady argues that the IBE-account captures the way that mature epistemic agents normally gain knowledge by testimony. (This still contradicts what I take to be one of Burge's central claims: that the perceptual processes normally involved in the acquisition of belief by testimony are purely preservative.)⁷³ Following Fricker, I concede that such knowledge is acquired in a different way during the epistemic agent's "developmental phase," and that only later, during her "mature phase," is it based on an inference to the best explanation. Most plausibly, the less mature agent has a *default warrant* to simply take what other people say on trust, and this is what enables her to gain some initial folk-psychological knowledge. But this warrant is no longer available (or, at least, no longer suffices for knowledge) once she has learned enough folk psychology.⁷⁴ Once she has done so, she simply knows *too much* to be default warranted in taking what others say on trust: in particular, she knows that there are at least two ways in

73. See section 1. At least it does so on the reasonable assumption that this claim is not implicitly restricted to the acquisition of belief by testimony by *children*. Compare note 76.

74. Someone might have the following worry: the weaker claim—that the warrant no longer suffices for knowledge—is the most plausible of the two, but this claim is (on the face of it) compatible with the mature agent's having some a priori warrant for her testimonial beliefs, and this is a major concession to Burge. I have two things to say in response: first, even if this is right, Burge's thesis would be considerably weaker than he makes out, since the mature agent still could not have a priori knowledge by testimony. Second, and more importantly, I argue below that we are not even in a position to gain a priori warranted belief by testimony during the developmental phase, and, if that is correct, we need not in fact make this concession to Burge.

which other people may fail to tell the truth—they may be insincere, or they may be incompetent (in general, or with respect to the subject matter in question). She also knows what counts as evidence that such a failure has occurred. For this reason, she is now, during the mature phase, required to do *more epistemological work* before she accepts what others tell her. And I suggest that the IBE-account provides the right model of the work that is now required of her.⁷⁵

It might be objected that, for all I have said, we *do* sometimes gain a priori knowledge by testimony—namely, during the developmental phase—since the child’s default warrant to take what other people say on trust is most plausibly seen as a priori. This (restricted) thesis would still be of interest, and it *might* even be acceptable to Burge.⁷⁶ In reply, I admit that what I argued so far leaves it open whether the child can have a priori testimonial knowledge. However, it would seem that the general considerations I have given in favor of the default presumption (see section 7) apply across the board—to both mature agents and children—and, if that is right, we should try to accommodate the presumption across the board too.

Here is how I suggest that we accommodate it, in the case of knowledge acquired early in the agent’s career: following Fricker, I said above that the child has a default warrant to take what other people say on trust. How, more precisely, is this to be understood? I just take it to mean that the child has a default warrant to make a transition—a (direct) transition from a belief about what is said to acceptance.⁷⁷ That is, this transition is *self-sufficient* for her. In this sense, then, but *only* in this sense, is her acceptance a priori warranted (compare section 5). Importantly, she does *not* have an outright a priori warrant to the beliefs she acquires in this way. To clarify, I hold that the child must still perform an inference—a belief-to-belief transition—albeit a very simple one, to be war-

75. Compare Fricker 1994 and 1995. Fricker (1995, 403) writes: “Simply-trusted testimony plays an inevitable role in the . . . process by which we become masters of our common sense scheme of things; but once we are so, the nature of testimony . . . entails that our belief in what others tell us should always be governed by our monitoring them for trustworthiness” (where “monitoring a speaker for trustworthiness” involves interpreting her behavior in light of the explanatory principles that belong to this commonsense scheme, and showing appropriate sensitivity to the presence of defeaters).

76. In one place, Burge (1993, 468) toys with the idea that a priori testimonial knowledge may be unavailable to “anyone over the age of eleven.” However, it should be noted that he immediately goes on to question this “hyperbolic conjecture” (Burge’s phrase).

77. I believe that this is also how Fricker understands it; see Fricker 1995, 399–403.

ranted in believing (hence to know) that *p* by testimony. She must perform an inference from her belief that John said that *p*, to the belief that *p*. This inference is much simpler than the inference the mature agent must perform, but the two have their first premises in common: that John said that *p*. As should be clear by now, the belief that John said that *p* can only be a posteriori warranted. Accordingly, the child's resultant belief—her belief that *p*—can only be a posteriori warranted too.

As already mentioned, it is independently plausible that the requirements on (testimonial) warrant and knowledge are higher the more sophisticated the subject is, and my suggestion is that the child has not yet reached the level of sophistication at which the higher requirements kick in. This has now been further explicated as follows: for the child, the transition from John said that *p* to *p* is self-sufficient—that is, she has a default warrant to move *straight* from a belief about what is said to a belief in what is said. The mature agent, in contrast, knows way too much about the ways things can go wrong in testimony to be entitled to this direct route. She must perform a more complicated inference—an inference to the best explanation of John's utterance—in order to gain a warranted belief that *p* by his testimony.

My suggestion, then, is that knowledge of what is said plays a familiar epistemic role even in the formation of testimonial knowledge by children: it figures as a crucial premise in the inference by which they acquire such knowledge (just as it does for mature agents). Coady's objection only forces us to recognize that the mature and the less mature agent take *different* inferential paths to the same conclusion. The mature agent makes an inference to the best explanation. The less mature agent moves straight from a belief about what is said, but since her belief about what is said is a posteriori warranted, so is her resultant belief. "Dogmatism" about perception provides a useful parallel here: on this view, the perceiver is warranted in moving straight from its seeming to her that *p* to the belief that *p*.⁷⁸ This, however, does not mean that the perceptual state (the state of its seeming to one that *p*) is epistemically insignificant,

78. See Pryor 2000. But note that I do not mean to suggest that the transition from perception to belief is an *inference*. (As I have been using the term 'inference', it applies only to transitions between beliefs.) Second, note that what I say about testimonial knowledge does not commit me to a similar divide-and-conquer view of perceptual knowledge. (But, for the record, I am in fact attracted to a view of that sort.) Third, note that, even if the model that I give for children is the right model for *everyone*—that is, even if I am wrong that mature agents make a more complicated inference—there is no a priori knowledge by testimony.

or that the resultant belief—the *perceptual* belief that *p*—is or can be a priori warranted.⁷⁹

9. Concluding Remarks

Burge maintains that the recipient of testimony comes equipped with two default warrants: the entitlement to rely on understanding, and the entitlement to rely on the rationality of her source. In this essay, I have discussed the first entitlement at some length. First, I argued that Burge's argument for the apriority of this entitlement is not successful (sections 2–3). Next, I argued that there is no plausible reading of the phrase “entitlement to rely on understanding” on which that entitlement is both a priori and helps explain the possibility of a priori knowledge by testimony (sections 4–5). Moreover, I argued that Burge is forced to say that knowledge of what is said plays a merely causal role in the acquisition of knowledge by testimony (section 6). But, on the face of it, knowledge of what is said plays an epistemic role—my warrant for believing that *NN* said that *p* somehow contributes to my warrant for believing that *p*. I also offered a way in which to cash out this intuition (section 8): my testimonial knowledge that *p* is based on an inference, a crucial premise of which is the proposition that *NN* said that *p* (and so my warrant for believing that *p* derives in part from my warrant for believing that *NN* said that *p*). I further argued that Burge provides no reason for thinking that this way of cashing out the intuition is flawed. Lastly, I replied to an independent objection, due to Coady, to this account of testimony.

It seems, then, that we have a rather strong case against the claim that there is a priori knowledge by testimony. I have argued that a crucial step in Burge's argument for this claim fails; moreover, I have argued on independent grounds that the claim is implausible.

79. It may be argued, on empirical grounds, that children acquire some testimonial beliefs prior to the acquisition of metasegmental concepts, that is, prior to having any beliefs about what is said. I am reluctant to say that a child can have testimonial *knowledge* at this stage. But arguably she can have some warranted beliefs by testimony. However, we can tell a similar, “dogmatist” story about this warrant too: at this *very* early stage in the agent's career, she is entitled to move straight from understanding (or even from perceptions of words) to testimonial beliefs. Here too, there is no reason to think that the resultant beliefs are a priori. (Since this child does not *have* any beliefs about what is said, the first consideration in section 7 does not apply. And, as mentioned in note 65, even if the acquisition of warranted belief by testimony requires a warranted belief about what is said, that requirement is plausibly conditional on the possession of metasegmental concepts. Hence she trivially satisfies it.)

I shall close by considering a further objection to my case. In the introduction, I granted that certain kinds of *memory* processes, namely, those normally involved in deductive reasoning, can yield a priori knowledge. It might be suggested that the considerations I have leveled against the corresponding claim about testimony apply to memory as well, and so that I am not in fact in a position to make this concession.⁸⁰ That would not undermine my argument, but it would be unfortunate, since the claim about memory has strong independent appeal. However, I do not think that the considerations carry over.

I have argued that knowledge of what is said plays an epistemic role in the acquisition of knowledge by testimony, and that knowledge of what is said cannot be a priori. Hence knowledge by testimony cannot be a priori. The corresponding argument for memory would run as follows: knowledge of *what one remembers*—say, knowledge that one remembers the result of an earlier step in a proof—plays an epistemic role in the acquisition of knowledge by deductive reasoning, but knowledge of what one remembers cannot be a priori. Hence knowledge by deductive reasoning cannot be a priori either.

There are at least two ways to respond. One is to say that knowledge of what one remembers, unlike knowledge of what is said, can in fact be a priori—given the notion of an a priori warrant that has been assumed throughout the discussion. That notion, recall, is the notion of a warrant that is independent of perception for its epistemic force, where *only the deliverances of the outer senses count as perception* (see the end of section 1). On this characterization of the a priori, it is not implausible that knowledge that one remembers that *p* can be a priori. You can know that you remember that *p* on the basis of *introspection*, and introspection does not, for present purposes, count as perception. But then, knowledge by deductive reasoning can be a priori, even if it rests in part on knowledge of what one remembers.

Arguably, this response secures the possibility of a priori knowledge by deductive reasoning. But perhaps the response grants too much.⁸¹ An alternative would be to say that knowledge of what one remembers does not in fact play an epistemic role in deductive reasoning, at least not in standard cases. (Note that this is much more plausible than the corresponding claim about knowledge of what is said. There is certainly no corresponding “default presumption.”) On the face of it, you do not in

80. Josh Schechter made this objection to me.

81. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

standard cases rely—in either the psychological or epistemic sense—on any belief(s) about what you remember.⁸² You simply reason from premises to conclusion, and the warrant you have for believing the conclusion is solely a function of the warrant you have for believing the premises, together with the warrant you have for using the relevant inference rule(s). As long as you in fact remember, say, the result of an earlier step in a proof (and you lack defeaters), your belief in that result remains warranted, and able to confer warrant on subsequent beliefs. This remains the case even if you forget how you reached the earlier result, and—crucially—even if you do not know (or have a warranted belief) that you remember the result.

According to the second response, then, the relevant difference between deductive reasoning and testimony is that, in the former case, the transfer of warrant normally only involves (and perhaps only requires) the proper functioning of memory and the absence of defeaters, whereas, in the latter case, the transfer of warrant normally involves (and perhaps even requires) a warranted belief on the part of the recipient that her source said that *p*. Not only does this response ensure that deductive reasoning can yield a priori knowledge; it also ensures that memory's role in such reasoning is normally *purely preservative*—that it preserves beliefs and warrants (if any) without adding to or altering the original epistemic status of the belief. What I argued above shows that perception does not have a purely preservative role in testimony, but there is no equally straightforward route to the corresponding claim about memory.⁸³

I will stay neutral here on which of these responses is the right one. Perhaps some combination of the two is the way to go. It seems clear that memory is not *always* purely preservative,⁸⁴ but it is much less clear that it *never* is—in particular, that it does not normally play a preservative role in reasoning. And, on the face of it, we can acknowledge that it does, without compromising the above conclusion about testimony. Whether this response is ultimately defensible is an open question, but, either way,

82. Insofar as you have any such beliefs, it does not seem plausible that they *causally mediate* the transition (from your beliefs in the premises to your belief in the conclusion). So arguably there is no need to worry about causal deviance here.

83. But there may be other routes, of a broadly “conservative” sort, to that conclusion. (See section 5.)

84. One reason to deny that memory is always preservative is that if it were, it could not *generate* warrant. But it seems plausible that, just like testimony, memory does sometimes generate warrant.

we can account for the fact that deductive reasoning sometimes delivers a priori knowledge. However, testimony never does.

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