

## THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

Duncan Pritchard  
University of Stirling

### 1. The Epistemology of Testimony—*Scylla and Charybdis*

As the title of this piece indicates, my interest here is the epistemology of testimony, or, more precisely, testimony-based belief. What I will be canvassing is a certain form of pessimism about the justification we have for this sort of belief.

Let us focus on what I take it is the paradigm case of testimony—the intentional transfer of a belief from one agent to another, whether in the usual way via a verbal assertion made by the one agent to the other, or by some other means, such as through a note.<sup>1</sup> So, for example, John says to Mary that the house is on fire (or, if you like, ‘texts’ her this message on her phone), and Mary, upon hearing this, forms the belief that the house is on fire and consequently exits the building at speed. Clearly, a great deal of our beliefs are gained via testimony, and if the epistemic status of our testimony-based beliefs were to be called into question *en masse*, then this would present us with quite a predicament. It is thus essential that we have some plausible account of the epistemology of testimony. Our primary focus will be on the *justification* for our testimony-based beliefs, though along the way we will say a little about other relevant epistemic notions like epistemic entitlement as well.

In what follows, we will call a ‘testimony-based belief’ (TBB) any belief which one reasonably and directly forms in response to what one reasonably takes to be testimony and which is essentially caused and sustained by testimony. A few remarks about this characterisation of a TBB is in order.

To begin with, it is worth noting that whilst this formulation of a TBB is quite permissive in that it allows that one can gain a TBB from a merely apparent instance of testimony (so long as the agent’s judgement that it is an instance of testimony is reasonably made), it is also somewhat restrictive in

that it insists that the agent forming the belief must regard the belief as testimony-based.<sup>2</sup> In order to simplify matters, in what follows we will take it for granted that the testimony in question is genuine and not merely apparent, unless the discussion demands otherwise.

Second, the purpose of the clause “reasonably and directly” is to allow that someone might legitimately draw a direct consequence from a testimonial assertion and that direct consequence still be regarded as a TBB. For example, if you assert “P, and if P then Q”, but do not also assert “Q”, I want to allow that one can legitimately form a belief not only in the proposition asserted but also in Q and that this latter belief should also be treated as a TBB. The belief needs to be directly formed since otherwise other factors will inevitably be brought into play, such as memory.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, third, the clause “essentially” is being used to put some pressure in a more restrictive direction by ruling out cases where other (non-testimonial) factors are playing a substantive role, either in the formation of one’s belief or in the sustaining of that belief. For example, if I know from my previous experience of dealings with you that you are a pathological liar, and I hear you assert “P”, then I might reasonably form the belief that not-P. Such a belief would not be a TBB on this view because it essentially rests not only on the instance of testimony in question but also on further collateral information gained via observation.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, the point that the belief must be sustained by testimony is meant to rule out cases in which a belief is originally gained via testimony but is later sustained by some other source of knowledge, such as observation. For example, once Mary sees for herself that the house is on fire we would expect her belief that the house is on fire to be sustained by her observation of the fire rather than by John’s testimony in this regard. By the lights of the characterisation just offered, therefore, this belief would no longer be a TBB.

Finally, it should be noted that this characterisation of TBBs allows that a TBB might be based on more than one instance of testimony, and that it might even be sustained by different instances of testimony over time. That said, for the sake of simplicity our focus in what follows will be on the basic case in this regard in which the agent forms a TBB on the basis of a single instance of testimony.

The contemporary discussion of the epistemology of testimony has tended to cluster around two opposing positions. On the one hand, there are the *reductionists* who argue, roughly, that the justification of an agent’s TBB is always dependent upon that agent possessing further independent grounds—i.e., at the very least, grounds that are independent of the instance of testimony in question.<sup>5</sup> The standard story goes that this camp of theorists gets their inspiration from Hume.<sup>6</sup> In effect, the idea is that the epistemic status of one’s TBBs can always be reduced to the epistemic status of one’s non-TBBs, and this is why the bold formulation of the reductionist

thesis is often known as *global reductionism*. We can formulate global reductionism roughly as follows:

*Global Reductionism*

For all of one's TBBs, if one's TBB is justified, then one is able to offer sufficient non-testimonial grounds in support of that TBB.

This formulation is rather vague of course, especially in its use of the qualifier "sufficient", but it will do for our present purposes.

One can see the attraction of the view. Plausibly, the mere fact that someone testifies that P is not a reason—or at least not a reason sufficient for justification at any rate—for believing P. Instead, one must be in the possession of further justifying grounds that are independent of this instance of testimony. The problem is, of course, that if those further grounds are themselves simply additional instances of testimony—e.g., someone else saying that one can trust the person making the original assertion—then the issue of one's justification for holding the original TBB, far from being resolved, simply gets moved one stage back on to the issue of one's justification for believing this further supporting TBB. The only way out of this chain of justification is, it seems, to find adequate supporting grounds which are non-testimonial, such as, say, one's observation over time of the testimonial reliability of the agent making the original assertion when it comes to the target subject matter. Thus, if we are to have justification for our TBBs, then that justification had better be reducible to a non-testimonial set of grounds.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side of the contemporary divide are the *defaultists*, or *credulists*, who maintain that the epistemic status of a TBB need not depend upon the agent possessing any independent grounds in favour of that belief. Just so long as there are no grounds for doubt in this regard, then one can acquire a justified TBB even whilst lacking independent grounds in favour of that belief. The standard story goes that this camp of theorists gets their inspiration from Reid.<sup>8</sup> In its starkest formulation this thesis is more than just the denial of global reductionism. Instead, it maintains something like the following claim:

*Bare Credulism*

For all of one's TBBs, one's TBB can be justified even though one is unable to offer any supporting grounds in favour of that TBB.

By allowing that one's TBBs can be justified even in the absence of any supporting grounds in their favour, the credulist is proposing quite a radical thesis. After all, one's TBBs don't seem to be the sort of beliefs that one would typically regard as forming part of one's basic beliefs, at least on any classical conception of that notion at any rate. They are not, for example,

the kinds of beliefs that are typically infallible, self-evident, or incorrigible. And note that if they were, then we wouldn't need a credulist thesis to explain their epistemic status since we could then simply appeal to one of the classical foundationalist models of justification instead. The idea behind credulism is that even despite being fallible, non-self-evident and corrigible, nevertheless TBBs can have an epistemic status which does not depend upon any further grounds that the agent possesses. Furthermore, this epistemic status is meant to be robust enough to be worthy of the title 'justification'. This is a bold thesis indeed.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, we will call any TBB that is justified because, at least in part (the reason for this qualification will become apparent below), it enjoys a default epistemic support a *T-basic TBB*.

Essentially, then, the worry that reductionists have is that without independent evidence there is no reason for thinking that a particular instance of testimony is true—more precisely, there is nothing in an instance of testimony which of itself indicates that it tends towards the truth. On this picture, the credulists are simply offering a recipe for widespread gullibility. In contrast, the credulists maintain that the reductionist model unduly intellectualises TBB by denying even the possibility that such beliefs might possess an innate epistemic status. By setting the hurdle for testimonial justification so high, they argue, the reductionist walks right into the trap set by the sceptic.

Of these two motivations, it is probably the reductionist rationale that fares better on initial inspection. The claim that reductionism overly intellectualises testimonial justification is not all that compelling given that the reductionist demand that agents must possess further grounds in favour of a TBB does not require any explicit inference on the part of the subject, nor even any great intellectual sophistication (the claim is not, for example, that one should run through an inference prior to forming any particular TBB).

The related claim made by the credulists regarding the scepticism-friendly nature of reductionism is more cogent, but is also only of ambiguous import. This objection emphasises our widespread cognitive dependence on testimony, especially as children, to highlight the implausibility of the reductionist model and show how it is congenial to a general scepticism about justification.<sup>10</sup> After all, if the reductionist thesis is that any justification for a TBB must ultimately rest upon non-testimonial foundations, then it is hard to see how the vast majority of our beliefs could ever be justified. Most of our beliefs seem to be ultimately or largely testimony-based, and this means both that the reductionist demand constrains the epistemic status of a large number of our beliefs and also that there are very few non-TBBs which could serve the required supporting role. Together, these two factors ensure that only a very restricted class of our beliefs is justified.

Take, for example, my belief that the earth is round. Although this might not initially seem to be a TBB, since one isn't typically aware of one

explicitly being told that this is the case, a moment's reflection reveals that it is almost certainly a TBB since it could hardly have been gained in any other way (by going into outer space to determine that this is the case for oneself, for example).<sup>11</sup> The problem is, of course, that it is hard to see how one could go about acquiring non-testimonial grounds for believing this proposition, since whatever further support one sought (e.g., from textbooks, or from photographs that purport to have been taken from outer space) would itself owe its epistemic status, whether directly or indirectly, to instances of testimony.<sup>12</sup> The same goes for many of our TBBs. But if that is right, and if it is also right that a good many of our beliefs in general are TBBs, then a fairly broad and disconcerting scepticism appears to immediately ensue.

Opting for the credulist position enables us to evade this problem by allowing our TBBs a positive epistemic status even in the absence of supporting grounds, but now one has to deal with the very different worry that afflicts this stance—*viz.*, how could it be that one could be justified in holding a TBB even in the absence of supporting reasons? Perhaps more pertinently, the worry is in what sense we can call the default epistemic status of these TBBs a 'justification' when there doesn't seem to be anything *justifying* the belief at all?<sup>13</sup> In any case, it is hardly much of an objection, in and of itself, to a particular epistemological view that it leads to scepticism, since such scepticism could well be *warranted*.

On the face of it, then, it seems that the choice is between either an epistemology of testimony (global reductionism) that makes plausible demands on what counts as a testimonial justification, but which leads directly to a form of scepticism about the epistemic status of our TBBs; or an alternative view (bare credulism) that can avoid the scepticism, but only at the cost of allowing us to be justified in holding TBBs even in the absence of supporting grounds.<sup>14</sup> The motivation for some sort of midway account is thus very strong. We will begin by examining the prospects for compromise from the reductionist side of the debate.

## 2. The Search for a Hybrid View (I)—Reductionism

One way in which one might qualify the reductionist thesis is to 'localise' the central reductionist claim that it makes. That is, whilst one retains the core reductionist requirement that one's justification for one's TBBs must always be dependent upon additional independent grounds (i.e., grounds which are independent of the target instance(s) of testimony), one drops the further demand that those independent grounds should be non-testimonial. So, for example, one cannot be justified in forming a TBB that P solely on the basis of hearing someone's testimony that P, but neither does one need to find epistemic support for that belief which goes beyond

additional testimonial grounds (such as the testimonial ground from another testifier that the original testifier can be trusted in this regard). One can find an influential version of this view in recent work by Elizabeth Fricker (1987; 1994; 1995).<sup>15</sup>

We can roughly formulate such a position as follows:

*Local Reductionism*

For all of one's TBBs, if one's TBB is justified, then one is able to offer sufficient independent grounds in support of that TBB.

The attraction of such a view is that it lessens the counterintuitive consequences of global reductionism. In particular, by dropping the demand that one's TBBs should always be supported by further non-testimonial grounds we both weaken the intellectualism that is held to be inherent in the view whilst also reducing its potential to generate sceptical consequences.

The problem with such a position, however, is that insofar as one is impressed by the considerations that led us to take the global reductionist thesis seriously, then one will not be satisfied by this weakening of the view. After all, for a wide class of our TBBs, the 'independent' support in question will simply consist of further TBBs which require independent support and which, moreover, will be 'independently' supported by further TBBs, and so on. In all likelihood a circle of justification will form here, in that the original TBB will at some point figure in one of the supporting classes of TBBs, but even if this does not happen, we are still left with a regress of justification, and that is hardly any better.<sup>16</sup> It seems, then, that if one is to motivate a suitable hybrid view then one is going to have to allow some of one's TBBs to have a default epistemic status.

One possibility in this respect, which retains at least the spirit of local reductionism, is to allow that TBBs have a default epistemic status, but only in the initial stages of our intellectual development. As noted above we largely gain our beliefs—and our picture of the world in general—from the testimony of others, and to insist on an unqualified version of reductionism appears to make this kind of knowledge acquisition epistemically problematic. One might contend, however, that one could consistently allow a default epistemic status to one's TBBs in this regard without thereby conceding the core claim behind the reductionist thesis as regards the beliefs of the intellectually developed. On this model, in offering independent support for one's TBB when one has passed the developmental stage, one may adduce TBBs gained whilst in the developmental stage and which as a result possess a default epistemic status. Accordingly, the chain of justification can come to an end with a TBB that requires no further epistemic support because of its default epistemic status.<sup>17</sup>

We thus get a thesis of roughly the following sort:

*Local Developmental Reductionism*

For all of one's TBBs gained in the non-developmental stage, if one's TBB is justified, then one is able to offer sufficient independent grounds in support of that TBB.

On the face of it, this seems to meet some of the problems facing both global and local reductionism. On the one hand, we can account of our intellectual development in a way that does not epistemically problematize our widespread acquisition of knowledge via testimony during this stage. And, on the other, we can also insist that once this stage has passed then one's TBBs must be placed under the scrutiny required by the reductionist model. Accordingly, the kind of epistemic dispensation licensed by the credulist, and which appears to allow widespread gullibility as an epistemic policy, is avoided.

Crucially, however, local developmental reductionism is not really a form of reductionism at all but a species of credulism, in that, in keeping with the spirit of credulism, it grants some TBBs a default epistemic status. With this in mind, it is better to situate this position amongst other credulist positions rather than with reductionist accounts. This is what we will now do.

### 3. The Search for a Hybrid View (II)—Credulism

There are several ways in which one might modify the bare credulist thesis. The most straightforward way is to weaken it by noting that in coming by an instance of testimony, understanding it (or seeming to at any rate), and recognising it as an instance of testimony, one thereby gains some epistemic support for one's TBB, even if that support is not in itself sufficient for justification (so that further default support is also necessary).<sup>18</sup> After all, the mere fact that someone would be willing to go to the trouble of asserting P at all is a *prima facie* reason for thinking that P is true.

With this in mind, we can formulate a modest credulism as follows:

*Modest Credulism*

For all of one's TBBs, one's TBB can be justified even though one is unable to offer any independent supporting grounds in favour of that TBB.

The credulist claim therefore comes down to the thesis that one's TBBs are able to possess a default epistemic status which, along with the grounds one gains for a TBB in virtue of it being a TBB, enables them to be justified even



in the absence of further independent grounds—provided, of course, that there are no grounds for doubt in this regard.

A second way in which one might modify the bare credulist thesis, which is in the spirit of the local developmental reductionism that we have just considered, is to place a restriction on the kind of TBBs that can be granted a default epistemic status. For whilst it might well be true that there is a standing presumption in favour of, say, a child's reliance on testimony, it is not nearly so plausible that such a default epistemic status should transfer to very different cases where TBBs are involved, such as in murder trials.<sup>19</sup> This then motivates the idea that it is not all TBBs that have a standing default epistemic status but only, at best, a specific sub-class of them.

Moreover, it is not as if one needs to allow that all of one's TBBs could potentially be T-basic TBBs in order to ensure that one can evade the kind of sceptical worry at issue in the debate about global reductionism. Just so long as a sufficiently large class of one's TBBs are justified in the absence of independent supporting grounds, then, at a formal level at any rate, the possibility remains that the chain of justification that is in play in favour of one's non-T-basic TBBs, whilst it might not sufficiently go outside of one's other TBBs, nevertheless does ultimately end with T-basic TBBs which do not stand in need of any further independent epistemic support for their justification. In the case of the TBBs gained in the developmental stage, and where no subsequent grounds for doubt in this regard have been raised, this seems very plausible. I need to offer independent support for my non-T-basic TBBs and, whilst at least a large part of this additional support will be itself testimonial, just so long as it incorporates T-basic TBBs (such as those TBBs gained in the developmental stage) in the appropriate way, then this can suffice to support a justification for my non-T-basic TBBs.

We can formulate such a restricted credulist thesis as follows:

*Modest Restricted Credulism*

For at least some of one's TBBs, one's TBB can be justified even though one is unable to offer any independent supporting grounds in favour of that TBB.

Note that this formulation leaves it open as to which class of TBBs is to be privileged in this regard. Moreover, this characterisation of restricted credulism is also consistent with the point made earlier as regards modest credulism that any TBB brings with it some supporting grounds, even if those grounds are not independent of the instance of testimony in question and even though they are not in themselves sufficient to support a justification (which is why I have called it a '*modest* restricted credulist' thesis).

Now one might argue that the difference between modest credulism and modest restricted credulism is rather limited, in that even by the lights of the



former proposal the claim is only that there is a *default* epistemic standing for one's TBBs, and thus it is implicitly incorporated into the view that there may be a wide class of TBBs for which this default status is overridden. Accordingly, one could treat, say, a developmental version of modest restricted credulism as being simply a modest credulist thesis on the grounds that there are always overriding considerations in play when it comes to the TBBs of those who are no longer in the developmental stage.

This may well be true, although I still think that such a view would be best expressed as a modest restricted credulist position. After all, the spirit of modest credulism is that the grounds for doubt come from defeaters that are specific to that particular belief, as when one is in possession of counter-evidence against the target proposition. In the case we are imagining, however, the defeaters are standing defeaters which apply to beliefs of a certain type rather than being specific to that belief.<sup>20</sup> It is thus more transparent to formulate the position as a modest restricted credulist thesis rather than simply as a modest credulist thesis. That said, we do not need to decide on this matter here, since we can treat both of these formulations of the modest credulist thesis as plausible ways in which one might refine the bare credulist account.

Nevertheless, this talk of defeaters does direct us towards a further modification that we should make to the bare credulist thesis. The issue relates to how it is part of the credulist view that one's TBBs only have the relevant default epistemic status provided that there are no grounds for doubt in this regard. With this in mind, however, there *is* an additional supporting ground in favour of the TBB which the agent does not gain in virtue of receiving the instance of testimony at issue—*viz.*, the ground that there are no grounds to doubt this TBB. This 'meta' ground is 'negative' in the sense that it is a ground for not doubting this TBB, as opposed to being a 'positive' ground in favour of belief in this TBB.

With this consideration in mind, we can re-formulate the two credulist theses just described as follows:

*Modest Credulism\**

For all of one's TBBs, one's TBB can be justified even though one is unable to offer any independent positive supporting grounds in favour of that TBB.

*Modest Restricted Credulism\**

For at least some of one's TBBs, one's TBB can be justified even though one is unable to offer any independent positive supporting grounds in favour of that TBB.

Note that in order to maintain the credulist thesis it is going to be essential that this independent ground is, as one would expect, insufficient to justify one's

TBB, even when combined with the non-independent grounds that one gains for one's TBB in virtue of it being a TBB. If this were not so then the core credulist claim that these beliefs have a default epistemic status would be lost.

We now have two fairly plausible renderings of what a compromise position might look like in the debate regarding the epistemology of testimonial beliefs, at least where the notion of justification is concerned. We have moved away from the austerity of the bare credulist thesis by acknowledging the fact that agents will always have some grounds in favour of their TBBs, even some independent grounds of a limited and negative sort. Nevertheless, we have also retained the key anti-global reductionist claim that there is a default epistemic status that accrues to at least some of our TBBs in virtue of them being TBBs, and hence rejected the analogous austerity of the global reductionist demand that our TBBs always be justified by appeal to non-testimonial grounds.

#### 4. Internalist Versions of Credulism

We are not quite home and dry yet, however, since we still need to identify what sort of epistemological thesis these credulist accounts are. In particular, we need to decide whether they should be understood along epistemological internalist or externalist lines. As we will see, this is easier said than done. We will begin by considering the prospects for these accounts when they are read as internalist theses.

We will define epistemological internalism about justification in the following way:

##### *Internalist Justification*

An agent's belief is internalistically justified if, and only if, the facts which determine that justification are knowable by the agent via reflection alone (i.e., through *a priori* reasoning, introspection of her own mental states, or memory of knowledge gained via either of these means).<sup>21</sup>

Specifically applied to the issue of testimonial justification, we thus get the following formulation of the internalist thesis:

##### *Internalist Testimonial Justification*

An agent's TBB is internalistically justified if, and only if, the facts which determine that justification are knowable by the agent via reflection alone.

And we will take epistemological non-internalism—i.e., *externalism*—about justification to consist in the denial of this thesis, such that it allows that an

agent can be justified without being able to know the facts which determine that justification by reflection alone.

Although there will always be a certain amount of debate about how best to draw this distinction, I think this characterisation is relatively uncontroversial in that it captures the key sense in which an internalist theory of justification demands a special kind of cognitive access on the part of the agent to the relevant justifiers. Moreover, it also accounts for how externalist theories, like reliabilist views, are externalist precisely because they allow facts to count as determining an agent's justification for her belief (such as facts about the reliability the agent's belief-forming process) which are not knowable by that agent by reflection alone.<sup>22</sup>

Consider how the two versions of the credulist thesis that we have just formulated fare if they are understood along internalist lines. To begin with, note that all internalist versions of the credulist account face an immediate problem regarding what the relevant reflectively accessible facts which determine justification are. When it comes to the bare credulist thesis this problem is particularly pressing since it seems as if there just are no reflectively accessible justification-determining facts that are applicable to T-basic TBBs. Moreover, since such T-basic TBBs are not usually of their nature self-justifying in any way—they are not typically of their nature self-evident, for example—it is not as if the relevant reflectively accessible facts could simply concern the epistemic properties of the T-basic TBB itself. Accordingly, it is hard to see how, on an internalist construal of bare credulism, one could regard T-basic TBBs as justified at all.

On the face of it, the modest versions of credulism that we have formulated fare better in this regard since they do make appeal to some supporting grounds in their account of the default epistemic status of T-basic TBBs. On the internalist view, these grounds will be understood in the standard way as being reflectively accessible to the agent. Thus we have an account here of how the epistemic support one has for one's T-basic TBBs can be dependent upon reflectively accessible facts which determine that epistemic support.

The problem, however, is that the relevant reflectively accessible facts here *only* suffice to determine a positive epistemic status for the T-basic TBBs. That is, they do not suffice, even by the lights of the credulist (indeed, *especially* by the lights of the credulist), to determine a *justification* for the T-basic TBBs. Accordingly, there is a lacuna in the justificational story on the internalist construal of the modest credulist model, one that parallels the lacuna in the internalist rendering of bare credulism that was just noted. Put starkly, the worry about internalist construals of the credulist thesis is that it looks as if nothing, or nothing sufficient at any rate, is doing the work of justifying one's T-basic TBBs, and if this is right then the justification for most of one's TBBs is lacking.

Moreover, even if one were able to adequately respond to this concern, further problems would remain. In particular, note that one of the facts

which is determining justification on the credulist account would be that there are no grounds for doubt—i.e., defeaters—available. On the face of it, this might not seem like a particularly problematic demand to make in that it is quite plausible to suppose that this would be a fact that is reflectively available to the subject. The problem, however, is that intuitively it is not enough merely to be of the *opinion* that there are no grounds for doubt—rather one also needs to be *competent* in forming judgements of this sort. That is, if one were completely incompetent when it comes to assessing whether grounds for doubt are present (one lacks skills for detecting obvious deception, for example), then one could meet this constraint on default epistemic status even though there are manifest grounds for doubt at issue in that situation (perhaps, for example, the testifier is making a very serious set of claims whilst dressed in a clown costume and tooting a horn after each statement).

This worry is structurally similar to a problem posed by Matthew Weiner (2003) regarding any local reductionist thesis that allows TBBs formed in the developmental stage a default justification, which is unsurprising given that we have already noted that such a position is, in effect, a form of restricted credulism. Weiner argues that this model of testimonial justification will not work because it generates the counterintuitive result that an adult and a child could hear the same piece of testimony and form a TBB solely on the basis of that testimony which is, respectively, justified in the latter case but not in the former. He claims that this is counter-intuitive because if these two beliefs are to be accorded different epistemic evaluations at all, then it should be the *adult's* belief that is privileged and not the child's. His reason for this is that adults will typically have acquired a discriminative capacity to evaluate testimony that children will usually lack and he notes in this respect that the child in this case would be likely to believe in the existence of Santa Claus on the basis of an isolated instance of testimony (Weiner 2003, 261). It takes experience to be good at detecting defeaters, and this is something that children lack.

Accordingly, when it comes to the 'no defeater' condition for internalist testimonial justification it is not enough for the agent to merely meet this condition by her own lights alone, no matter how incompetent her ability to detect grounds for doubt may be. Instead, what we require of the agent is that she is competent in this regard and thus, on the internalist account, this will mean that she must have adequate grounds for believing that she is competent. And since this is an additional fact which determines justification, on the internalist account it will be necessary that these grounds are also understood, in the usual way, as being reflectively accessible to the agent.

Once one has imposed this further restriction on internalist testimonial justification, however, then, as suggested by Weiner's complaint against local developmental reductionism, a problem immediately emerges for any

version of the modest local credulist thesis that is cast along developmental lines. After all, the whole point of this sort of position is that those in the developmental stage lack adequate grounds for thinking that they are competent in this regard—this is part of what contributes to the fact that they are in the developmental stage. At the very least, then, internalism about justification does not sit well with a modest local credulism understood along developmental lines. Given that part of the attraction of credulist views is that they can explain how we can come to (legitimately) acquire a wide set of beliefs about the world on the basis of testimony without being in a position, at least initially, to offer independent grounds in favour of those beliefs, this result is very worrying for the credulist.

Moreover, the problem at issue here extends beyond developmental versions of the modest local credulist position. In order to see this, all one needs to recognise is that the kind of reflectively accessible grounds that one has in favour of one's belief in one's competence in this regard had better not simply consist of further TBBs if they are to play the required supporting role. For suppose for a moment that the only grounds one possessed in this respect were themselves simply further TBBs. The question would then arise as to one's reflective access to the facts which justify these TBBs, and this will include facts concerning one's grounds for regarding oneself as competent at detecting defeaters in the situations in which these TBBs were acquired. Furthermore, it is not as if an appeal to further T-basic TBBs would help in this respect, since even in this case one would still need to have reflectively accessible grounds for regarding oneself as being competent at detecting defeaters in the situations in which they were acquired, and so the chain of justification would simply continue.

A regress of justification—or, failing, that, a *circle* of justification—is thus starting to loom which is structurally akin to that in play when we considered reductionist views. Indeed, as with reductionist views, one possible way of preventing this regress is to justify one's TBBs by appeal to one's non-TBBs, but then one would be faced with the equally disastrous prospect of the kind of limited scepticism that we saw above to be entailed by reductionist accounts. It seems, then, that a limited scepticism faces us either way. The moral is clear: insofar as one interprets this 'competence' constraint in a manner that is robust enough to make the epistemic status that results when one forms one's TBBs in ways that meet this constraint a type of justification then one is presented with the sort of worries about regresses of justification that the move to credulism was meant to avoid.

An internalist version of the credulist thesis is thus faced with two key problems. The first is to account for how one's TBBs can be justified at all by the lights of this thesis given that there appears to be a lacuna in the reflectively accessible grounds that are supposed to determine justification in this respect. The second problem comes in the form of a dilemma

regarding how we understand the ‘no defeater’ condition. Either we understand that condition robustly, such that it demands adequate reflectively accessible grounds on the part of the agent for thinking that she is competent in this regard, in which case we are presented with the same kinds of worries about circularity and regress that the credulist thesis was meant to help us avoid; or else we interpret the ‘no defeater’ condition liberally such that adequate grounds for competence in this respect are not demanded, but then it looks as if there is now good cause to doubt whether what we are proposing here is a theory about epistemic *justification* at all.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider this last point further, since there does seem to be an epistemic notion available here which is weaker than justification that might be what we are left with on the liberal reading of the ‘no defeater’ condition. Consider again the child and the adult in the scenario that Weiner envisaged. Furthermore, suppose that there are clear grounds for doubt present in this case—say, the ‘testifier’ is finding it hard to suppress laughter whilst making the ‘assertion’ in question. It is a defeater of this sort that the adult should be taking into account when she forms her TBBs, and if she doesn’t give it due weight in this case—perhaps because she just isn’t paying attention to the speaker, for example—then this would count against her possessing a justification for her TBB. We can account for this on the internalist credulist account of testimonial justification by contending that she lacks the necessary reflective accessible grounds for thinking that she has formed her TBB competently in this respect.

Now consider the case of the child faced with the same instance of testimony. As Weiner points out, if either of these agents is justified then it will be the adult, and so it is implausible to suppose that the child’s TBB is justified in this case. Nevertheless, there does seem to be an epistemic status that is applicable to the child’s TBB that is lacking in the case of the adult, and this is that we would regard the child as being *epistemically blameless* in forming her TBB even whilst not taking into account this defeater. Unlike the adult, who we think should have been more careful in the formation of her TBB, we recognise that the child does not know any better and cannot be expected to have known any better. She is doing the best she can, by her lights, which is more than can be said of the adult, and in this sense she has an *epistemic entitlement* to her belief. Nevertheless, since, *ex hypothesi*, neither agent is justified in forming her TBB, the epistemic blamelessness or entitlement that is accruing to the child’s TBB is a weaker epistemic status than that at issue in a justification. At most, then, all an internalist construal of the credulist thesis can offer is an account of the epistemic blamelessness or entitlement of forming T-basic TBBs; it does not establish a justification for those beliefs. Since it was the latter that was the goal of the credulist project (at least as we have understood it here), this is not enough.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Externalist Versions of Credulism

So if we are to make sense of the credulist account of justification, it is essential that we interpret it along externalist lines. This conclusion will not come as a surprise to many involved in this debate, since it is often just taken for granted that a credulist thesis is tied, whether explicitly or implicitly, to an externalist epistemology. Rather than get drawn into the details of specific externalist renderings of the credulist thesis, we will just say that what is common to all of them is the idea that, broadly speaking, the *reliability* of the relevant belief-forming process can contribute to the epistemic status of the agent's TBB, regardless of whether the agent has reflectively accessible grounds for thinking that this reliability is being exhibited. We will leave it an open question how this 'reliability' is to be understood, whether in terms of a modal condition, such as the sensitivity or safety condition, or in terms of some kind of proper functionalist or virtue-theoretic thesis, or in some other way.

Note that this externalist brand of credulism can allow that there will be certain grounds that one will gain in forming a TBB simply in virtue of that belief being a TBB, and it is consistent with this sort of view that these grounds are understood internalistically as being reflectively accessible to the agent. Nevertheless, the point remains that such grounds are, in themselves at any rate, insufficient to justify a TBB. On the externalist account, what additional epistemic support is required to justify a TBB can come from non-reflectively accessible factors, such as the reliability of the belief-forming mechanism that is in operation.

For example, if I am in fact forming my TBB in an (externally) appropriate way then, even if I have no good independent reflectively accessible grounds in favour of my belief—such as grounds for thinking that I am forming this belief appropriately—my belief could still be justified. Thus, the first problem raised above against internalist versions of the credulist thesis, regarding the apparent lacuna in epistemic support, is met, since there is no gap to fill on this view. That my reflectively accessible grounds do not suffice to ensure a justification for my TBB is neither here nor there on this picture, since non-reflectively accessible factors, such as the reliability of the process by which I formed my TBB, can contribute to the epistemic status of this belief.

Moreover, the second issue raised above regarding how one is to understand the 'no defeater' condition can also be dealt with on this model. As we saw, it is necessary that such a condition is understood relatively robustly if it is to perform the required role in helping to establish a *justification* for one's T-basic TBBs rather than just the mere epistemic blamelessness of these beliefs. It was hard to see how this demand could be met on the internalist construal of the credulist thesis since insofar as this condition is



understood as robustly as it needs to be then a regress (or a circle) of justification quickly opens up that undermines the prospects for establishing the widespread justification of our TBBs. On the externalist rendering of the thesis, however, no such regress (or circle) presents itself because the additional feature supporting the justification need not be specified in such a way that the agent must have reflective access to it, and it was this element of the view that was creating the regress (/circle). Accordingly, the second key problem with internalist versions of the credulist thesis that we noted is also met.

We do not need to get into the details of specific externalist renderings of the credulist thesis in order to recognise, however, that such a view faces some fairly pressing problems of its own. To begin with, note that an externalist version of the credulist thesis will be unable to do any better when it comes to our TBBs formed in the developmental stage than its internalist rival. This is because, as we noted above, agents in such a stage of development will lack the competency in evaluating testimony (and, relatedly, defeaters) that comes with repeated exposure to instances of testimony within a social milieu, and this is bound to undermine their reliability in forming TBBs. At best, then, all we will be able to say about the TBBs formed by agents in this stage is that these agents are epistemically blameless in holding them, not that they are justified in holding them, whether by the lights of an externalist *or* an internalist account of testimonial justification.

This is not the only problem facing externalist treatments of the credulist thesis either, since there are pressing concerns about whether we can even make sense of the notion of externalist justification when it comes to testimony. Of course, there are many who think that an externalist rendering of the notion of justification is *never* possible, as regards *any* kind of subject matter, but that is not the issue that I wish to raise here. After all, externalist treatments of justification do seem (or so I would argue at any rate) very plausible in a wide range of cases, especially when it comes to our basic perceptual beliefs. Here what is most important is, I would argue, that the belief was formed in the right kind of way, regardless of whether the agent is able to offer sufficient reflectively accessible grounds in favour of that belief (such as grounds for thinking that the belief was formed in the right kind of way).

Moreover, it is not as if in the case of testimony the externalist is offering a 'pure' treatment of the justification of TBBs such that reflectively accessible grounds play no role whatsoever (as occurs in the more problematic cases on which the externalist/internalist debate focuses, such as regarding the so-called 'chicken-sexers'). In particular, on the view sketched here some reflectively accessible grounds accrue to the agent's belief just in virtue of the belief in question being a TBB. Instead, the crux of the thesis proposed by the externalist credulist is simply that, at least for some TBBs,

the justification one possesses for one's TBBs will be at least partly determined by 'external' factors (such that these TBBs would be unjustified without the contribution of these 'external' factors).

Nevertheless, even if we grant the general plausibility of externalism about justification and also note the 'mixed' nature of the externalist thesis in this respect, there are still worries remaining about this particular use of externalism. The worry concerns how TBBs are not obvious candidates to be subject to the kind of externalist treatment that is needed in this regard. In short, the worry is that the 'mixed' externalist treatment on offer does not contain a robust enough internal component, but that if we were to enhance the internal component to the justification then we would be back facing the very same problems that afflicted the internalist versions of credulism.

In order to see this, it is worth contrasting a case in which an agent forms a TBB with a scenario in which that same agent forms the same belief, though this time via perception. Moreover, in order to keep the examples constant, we will stipulate in each case that the epistemic support for the belief is 'mixed' in the same way. That is, the 'internal' component will solely consist of those reflectively accessible grounds that the agent gains in virtue of acquiring the belief in the relevant manner, with the 'external' component making up the rest of the rest of the total epistemic support that the agent has for this belief.

Imagine, for instance, that the proposition in question is that the agent's car is outside on the driveway. In the perceptual case, this belief is formed via the agent looking outside and seeing what looks to be her car on the driveway. In the testimonial case, in contrast, the belief is formed by the agent hearing an apparent instance of testimony to this effect. In both cases, we will stipulate that the agent has no other reason for thinking that her car is, or isn't, on the driveway. (Suppose, for example, that our agent's car has been away at the garage and she has no expectation that it will be delivered back today, but no expectation either that it won't be delivered back today—she just has no idea when it is due to be returned).

In the perceptual case, it does seem entirely plausible to suppose that the agent is justified in forming this belief just so long as this belief was indeed formed in an appropriate way. If, say, the agent's perceptual faculties are functioning correctly within an environment for which they are suited (the lighting is good and so forth), then this will (depending on the details of the externalist theory under consideration) suffice for the agent to have a justified belief in this respect. We would expect (and we may even insist) that the agent also comes by some reflectively accessible grounds in favour of her belief in virtue of gaining her belief in this way (the fact that it looks as if one's car is parked outside on the driveway is, after all, a *prima facie* reflectively accessible ground for thinking that it is parked outside), but we would not demand any further reflectively accessible grounds before we would count this belief as justified. In particular, it seems unnecessary to

insist that the agent has *independent* reflectively accessible grounds in favour of this belief, such as grounds for thinking that she is indeed employing reliable cognitive faculties in appropriate circumstances, or (in normal circumstances at least) grounds for thinking that there are no defeaters present.

The situation is very different, however, when it comes to the corresponding TBB in this proposition. In this case we are to suppose that the agent forms her TBB simply in response to hearing an apparent instance of testimony to the effect that her car is on the driveway. Moreover, we are to suppose that the epistemic support for this belief is due only to those reflectively accessible grounds that the agent acquires in virtue of forming that TBB along with the relevant 'external' facts demanded by whichever externalist version of the credulist thesis is under consideration. The crux here is that, intuitively, without independent reflectively accessible grounds this TBB is not justified. If the only grounds available to the agent for thinking that this belief is true are the grounds gained in virtue of the belief being a TBB, then reliability in the method of belief-formation, however that is to be specified, will not be enough to ensure that the belief is justified.

One way to see this point is to consider what each of these agents would say if asked why they believe what they do. Whilst it seems unproblematic for an agent to say that she believes that her car is on the driveway simply because it looks as if it is there, it does seem highly problematic for that same agent to say that that she believes this proposition simply because someone told her that this was the case. Part of the point here is that, unlike the perceptual case, it is hard to see what the testimonial reliability in question could consist in if it did not manifest itself in further independent reflectively accessible grounds. Whilst we can conceive of an agent exhibiting a perceptual reliability without thereby acquiring any reflectively accessible grounds for thinking that such reliability is being exhibited, how would one exhibit a testimonial reliability without having such additional grounds? Here the reliability is constituted by the agent's ability to make sound judgements about, for example, the testifier's authority to make the assertion in question, the plausibility of the assertion made, and the appropriateness of the testifier making this assertion in this context (an instance of testimony that is *apropos* nothing in particular is usually a cause for suspicion, for example). It is hard to see how these recognitional capacities could be in play in the formation of a TBB without this resulting in the agent acquiring additional independent reflectively accessible grounds to back up the belief in question.

The testimonial example that we have just described is thus immediately puzzling in that the absence of such grounds itself calls into question our stipulation that these reliable testimonial belief-forming traits are present. This is reflected in the fact that whilst an adequate response to why one believes what one does in the perceptual case can sometimes be simply that this is way things look, it is hard to see how the equivalent response in the

testimonial case (i.e., that this is what I was told) would ever be acceptable. In the perceptual case, such a defence doesn't in any way call into question whether one is forming one's belief in an appropriate fashion, whilst in the testimonial case, in contrast, it does.

Of course, we need to remember here that the apparent exception to this are those TBBs that are formed in the developmental stage, which seem to be unobjectionable even in the absence of supporting reflectively accessible grounds. Here it *can* be appropriate to say that the only reason one believes what one does is because this is what one was told. Crucially, however, in this case it is taken as given that the reliability in question is *not* being exhibited, since this is part of what constitutes an agent being in the developmental stage. Accordingly, there is no question here (at least on the externalist account at any rate) of the agent's belief being justified, and thus no issue regarding how this relatively ungrounded assertion could call into question a presupposed testimonial reliability. All we have here, as noted above, is mere epistemic blamelessness, not justification.

If one is to advance a plausible externalist credulist thesis, it is thus going to be essential that one insists on further independent reflectively accessible grounds being possessed by the agent, and thus one must abandon the key credulist claim that there are T-basic TBBs. When it comes to such 'local' beliefs regarding the location of one's car, then one may well be able to adduce independent grounds which are not themselves, at least ultimately at any rate, TBBs. Perhaps, for example, one has personal experience of the authority of this informant as regards assertions of this sort. The difficulty, however, is that most of our TBBs do not concern such 'local' beliefs in this way, and hence we are back to the familiar reductionist problem regarding how supplying adequate justificatory support for one's TBBs requires one to cite further TBBs, leading to a regress (or circle) of justification. The sceptical worry that results here does not afflict all of one's TBBs, but it will afflict enough of them to ensure that the scope of our testimonial justifications is far more limited than we might have otherwise supposed.<sup>24</sup>

So there are also problems with conceiving of the credulist account along externalist lines. And given that internalism and externalism are exhaustive options in this respect, this means that there is a standing challenge present to the justification for a wide class of our TBBs.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

1. This way of putting matters sets to one side those types of 'testimony' that raise distinctive problems, such as, for example, insincere or unintentional 'testimony'. Although the type of testimony that will be the focus here is to a certain degree a restricted class, it is more inclusive than the dominant account of testimony in the literature that is offered by Coady (1992). This incorporates

- the requirements that the agent is authoritative about the proposition asserted and that the assertion in question is relevant to the conversational context. See Coady (1992, 42). This view is criticised and slightly amended in Graham (1997); see also Fricker (1994).
2. For a contrasting view in this regard, see Audi (2002, 79). Note, however, that by 'reasonably' here I only have epistemic blamelessness in mind, rather than the stronger notion of epistemic justification (this contrast will be explained further below), and so this feature of the characterisation of TBBs is not as restrictive as it might at first appear. Indeed, on this way of understanding reasonableness, this formulation of TBBs is consistent with the possibility that small children are able to form TBBs.
  3. That said, the use of memory in forming one's TBBs may not be problematic in this regard just so long as it does not contribute any additional information, or at least any additional information which is not itself testimony-based. In order to keep matters simple, however, we will set this possibility to one side.
  4. What if my belief that you are a pathological liar is itself testimony-based? Even here it would be problematic to regard the resulting belief as a TBB, because of the essential role of memory in the formation of the belief. (Nevertheless, as noted in the last footnote, there may be grounds to be more permissive where memory is concerned). In general, it is worth noting that there is a continuum here. At the one end of the continuum there is the drawing of obvious logical inferences from what has just been said, which I maintain is consistent with this restriction. At the other end, in contrast, there is the employment of a substantive degree of collateral non-testimonial information, which I maintain is inconsistent with this restriction. In between there will be some 'grey' areas, especially given the fact that what is an immediate logical inference from a testimonial assertion when it comes to the Sherlock Holmes's of this world may not be an immediate logical inference when it comes to us mere mortals.
  5. Reductionist views are also often referred to as being 'inferentialist', but I won't be employing this terminology here because it tends to be misleading, implying that the reductionist position goes hand-in-hand with the view that the epistemic status of our TBBs must be understood in terms of the agent concerned making an actual inference.
  6. The passage that tends to be quoted in this respect is Hume (1748, 111), though there are actually good textual grounds not to take this passage at face-value in the way that it is often taken. For more on the Humean position, see Coady (1992, chapter 2).
  7. Or at least, reducible to grounds which the agent reasonably holds to be non-testimonial. For some recent (and qualified) versions of the reductionist thesis, see Adler (1994), Fricker (1994) and Lyons (1997).
  8. See, for example, Reid (1970, 240–1).
  9. In the contemporary literature, the credulist thesis is most often associated with the work of Coady (1973; 1992) and Burge (1993; 1997), though in neither case is the position stated quite as starkly as we have formulated it here. See also Stevenson (1993), Foley (1994), Audi (2002) and Weiner (2003).
  10. This worry about how dependent we are on testimony in our acquisition of knowledge connects up with the point often made against global reductionism

that it is unclear how we could ever learn a language and so understand the instances of testimony in play if we were to pursue the epistemic policy that this thesis lays down. This is one of the key claims made by Coady (1992) in favour of a credulist model of the epistemology of testimony. The more general claim that a good deal of what we believe is ultimately based on testimony is widely noted. See, for example, Stevenson (1993, 437) and Sosa (1994, 59). This claim is also a recurrent motif of Wittgenstein (1969).

11. Of course, one might have reasonably inferred this belief from other beliefs one holds. Crucially, however, the 'other beliefs' in question here will almost certainly be themselves TBBs. Accordingly, this belief would also have been brought about via testimony and hence, although it is moot whether this belief would count as a TBB by the lights of the characterisation of that notion set forth here (it would depend on how immediate the inference was from those instances), it would be akin to a TBB in the key respect of being causally dependent on testimony.
12. In the case of the textbook the testimonial support is direct in that this is itself a form of testimony. In the case of the photograph the testimonial support is indirect in that, intuitively at any rate, one can only regard the photograph in question as showing that the earth is round provided one is also entitled to certain further claims which will be inevitably testimony-based—e.g., amongst other things, that it was taken from outer space and has not been interfered in any way.
13. I think it is telling that proponents of this sort of position often express the point not in terms of justification but in terms of the weaker notion of *entitlement*. My interest here, however, is in the credulist thesis as a theoretical alternative to reductionism, and thus as a view about justification. Accordingly, I will set those construals of the thesis that drop the reference to justification to one side. I comment further on the contrast between justification and entitlement below.
14. For more on the main contours of the debate between reductionists and credulists, see Fricker (1987; 1995) and McDowell (1994), though note that the main focus for McDowell's discussion, unlike ours, is testimonial *knowledge* rather than justification.
15. See also, Fricker (2004). For two useful and recent discussions of Fricker's local reductionism, see Insole (2000) and Weiner (2003).
16. For a development of this general line of argument against local reductionism, see Weiner (2003). For a critique of both local and global reductionism, see Insole (2000).
17. Fricker herself expresses sympathy with this sort of proposal. See, for example, Fricker (1995, 402–3). For recent discussion of this distinction between the 'developmental' and 'mature' stages in the light of the epistemology of testimony, see Insole (2000) and Weiner (2003).
18. Of course, if one allows, with Audi (2002, 79), that one could gain a TBB without recognising the instance of testimony in question *as* an instance of testimony, then this variety of modest credulism would be unavailable.
19. I discuss the specific epistemological demands placed on testimony in the legal context in Pritchard (2005).
20. Moreover, note that the class of beliefs at issue is defined non-epistemically. That is, we are considering a case where the relevant class of TBBs which lack

the default epistemic status in question is defined in terms of how they were acquired in the developmental stage rather than, for example, in terms of how they were acquired in epistemically sub-optimal environmental conditions. Where the target class of beliefs is understood in the latter epistemic fashion, then it may well be that nothing would be gained by characterising one's modest credulist thesis in restricted, rather than unrestricted, terms, but this consideration does not apply here.

21. In both this characterisation of epistemological internalism and reflective access, I follow the account given by Pryor (2001) in his extremely useful survey of recent trends in epistemology.
22. For more on the externalism/internalism distinction, see the papers collected in Kornblith (2001).
23. The thesis that justification should not be identified with mere epistemic blamelessness is commonly made by the leading epistemological internalists. For two recent examples of this, see Pryor (2001) and Bonjour in Bonjour & Sosa (2003, §10.1). The reader should note that I am not suggesting here that the notions of epistemic blamelessness and epistemic entitlement are synonymous or even co-extensive, only that there is no important difference between them in this particular case because they are both clearly weaker epistemic notions than justification.
24. Note that the further question of whether this limited scepticism will have ramifications for our testimonial knowledge is moot on the externalist account, since it is an open question on this view whether justification is necessary for knowledge (although, for some of the reasons just given, it is more plausible, I take it, to suppose that justification is necessary for knowledge in the testimonial case than it is in other cases).
25. I'm grateful to the organisers of *The Trial on Trial* project—Antony Duff, Lindsay Farmer, Sandra Marshall and Victor Tadros—for inviting me to address their workshops at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow on the topic of 'Testimony', since it was this stimulus that got me working on this issue in the first place. Thanks also to Tony Pitson for discussions on the historical background to this debate, and to Lizzie Fricker, Axel Gelfert and Alan Millar for all their help. Finally, I am grateful to The Leverhulme Trust for the award of a Special Research Fellowship which has enabled me to conduct research in this area.

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