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ARTICLE

Could Testimony Be the Sole Source of Justification for Moral Belief?

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Abstract

The thesis that testimony is the sole foundational source of justification for moral belief will strike many as ridiculous and a non-starter for theorizing about the justification of moral beliefs. Call this thesis testimonial foundationalism. This paper argues that testimonial foundationalism deserves to be taken seriously as a live option in moral epistemology. First, I argue that if we think non-moral testimony can propositionally justify belief, then we should think that moral testimony doing the same is no more problematic. Second, I show that there are good *prima facie* reasons to hold testimony as the unique source of propositional justification for moral belief: Testimonial foundationalism requires fewer metaphysical commitments, gives the best explanation of our practices in moral education, and there are no special reasons stemming from skeptical challenges pushing us to reject the thesis. Finally, I tackle the "obvious objection," which argues that in order to successfully testify to a moral fact, the testifier must first know that moral fact, but it is impossible for the first testifier to have moral knowledge by the lights of testimonial foundationalism. I conclude with an upshot of the paper, which is that it reveals there to be two independent projects in moral epistemology: providing a theory of justification for moral belief, and providing a theory of the reliability of our moral beliefs.

Keywords: Moral testimony; moral knowledge; propositional justification; epistemic foundationalism; moral inquiry; moral education; social epistemology

1. Introduction

The thesis that testimony is the sole foundational source of epistemic justification for moral belief is likely to strike most as ludicrous and a complete non-starter. In fact, the lengthiest engagement with the view in the literature dismisses the view within a paragraph:

> Suppose for the moment that you think that we can get ethical knowledge by testimony . . . This seems like it might be a straightforward and familiar way of getting ethical knowledge. However, it cannot explain how ethical knowledge is possible. This is because, in general, testimonial evidence is only good if the testifier knows what they are talking about . . . This shows that ethical knowledge seemingly could not be testimonial "all the way down."[1]

[1]McPherson, Tristram. 2020. *Epistemology and Methodology in Ethics*. Cambridge University Press. 37.

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Let us call this much dismissed view *testimonial foundationalism*.[2]

The goal of this paper is to show that *testimonial foundationalism* deserves serious discussion rather than immediate dismissal.[3] In this paper I will formulate the view as two core theses. First is *foundational optimism*: someone's testifying that "φing is wrong," *propositionally* justifies me in believing that φing is wrong. The second thesis is *unique foundation*: nothing else provides propositional justification for moral beliefs.[4] In other words, what this thesis states is that moral testimony is the sole regress stopper for the justification of moral beliefs.

This paper proceeds in three parts: A positive argument, a negative argument, and addressing what I will call the "obvious objection." The positive argument aims to establish *foundational optimism*. The strategy is to argue that if we think non-moral testimony gives us propositional justification for belief, then we should think that moral testimony doing the same is no more problematic. The negative argument motivates *unique foundation*. I argue that we should be interested in testimonial foundationalism because it has theoretical advantages over rivals. To give a brief preview here, I claim that taking testimony as our foundation is less mysterious compared to rivals, uniquely respects the role that moral education plays in moral inquiry, and stands on equal footing with rival epistemologies in fending off skeptical challenges. The third part responds to the "obvious objection," which is what to say about the first person to give moral testimony. The complaint is that in order to successfully testify to a moral fact, the first testifier must first know that moral fact, but that is impossible by the lights of testimonial foundationalism. As a preview to my response, I'll say that the first worry only works on a transmission view of testimony, which is not obligatory to accept.

To be clear, the task I have set up for myself here is *not* to make a substantial case that testimonial foundationalism should be endorsed or adopted, or that we should think it is true. Rather, the task of this paper is to show that the view deserves to be taken seriously as an option in moral epistemology. The task of making substantial arguments for preferring it to other moral epistemologies is a task for later papers.

2. The case for *foundational optimism*

The basic core of testimonial foundationalism is as follows: Testimony is an immediate, non-inferential source of justification, where if one says that 'p' the hearer is prima facie justified in believing that 'p'. Call this foundational optimism. Versions of this claim are defended by a variety of different philosophers.[5] For example, one could follow Miranda Fricker (2007) in positing a quasi-perceptual model of testimony, or one could adopt McDowell's (1998) disjunctive theory of testimony. Fully fleshing out a version of testimonial foundationalism is beyond the scope of this paper; for my purpose it is enough to assume the basic core while remaining neutral on further details.

[2]See pg 274 of McGrath (2021) for a very similar dismissal to McPherson's.

[3]Note that I do not intend for my argument to be read as a modal claim. Rather, what I take my argument to be is the claim that the kind of immediate dismissal made by philosophers, that moral knowledge "seemingly could not be testimonial 'all the way down'" (McPherson (2020)), is incorrect, and that we have good prima facie reason to take testimonial foundationalism as worth further exploration.

[4]Although I use the belief that some action is wrong as an example, I assume that testimony provides basic justification for beliefs about rightness, goodness, and badness as well.

[5]For defenses of testimony providing immediate, non-inferential justification in non-moral cases, see Coady (1992), McDowell (1998), Fricker (2007), and Kusch (2002).

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What follows is the *prima facie* case for testimonial foundationalism. I'll first give reasons to think that *general* foundational optimism is plausible, and then argue that if we think that, then *moral* foundational optimism is too. If my argument is correct, then if we are moral testimonial fundamentalists then we are optimists about moral testimony as well. That is, we should think that justified moral belief is possible through testimony.

Foundational optimism is the claim that the epistemic contribution of testimony is *sui generis*, and it is fairly easy to see why it is a plausible starting point.[6] To see this, imagine a teacher instructing a young child that Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system. A young child has no information on the reliability of the instructor, nor other sources of evidence to support believing the claim, yet the child is plausibly justified in believing that Jupiter is the largest planet solely in virtue of being told. Similarly, we typically ask strangers for directions without knowledge of their reliability and lack any evidence to support the directions we receive. Yet, it seems we are not making any epistemic missteps when believing the stranger's directions. In non-moral cases, testimony does appear to be a unique form of epistemic justification.

If general, foundational optimism is plausible, then we should think that *moral* foundational optimism is plausible as well.[7] To see this, consider an example adapted from Jones (1999): Jimmy is on a hiring committee with female coworkers, and some applicants are turned down because the women on the board determine some applicants to be sexist. Jimmy lacks the disposition to detect the sexist cues that his female coworkers do, and so Jimmy defers to his coworkers when determining whether or not potential hires were being sexist. As such a case demonstrates, it seems that Jimmy does learn a moral fact through testimony, namely that the potential hires are sexist. Furthermore, it seems that the justification that Jimmy receives through the testimony is not reducible to other kinds of justification, such as inference, memory, or perception.[8]

If moral foundational optimism is plausible, the door to holding testimony as the *sole* basic source of moral justification opens. Yet, to the extent that the literature discusses moral testimony, the debate is primarily concerned with issues of deference and pessimism about the possibility of moral testimony. The goal for the remainder of this paper is to fill this lacuna and make an initial case for thinking testimonial foundationalism is an attractive theoretical option.

3. The case for *unique foundation*

In this section, I make the case for the second thesis that composes testimonial foundationalism: unique foundation. To review, unique foundation claims that testimony is the sole foundational source of justification for moral belief and that nothing else provides propositional justification for moral belief. This case is motivated in three parts. First, I will argue that testimony is better positioned when it comes to concerns about metaphysical commitments. I then argue that considerations from moral education are better captured by testimonial foundationalism than by its rivals. I close this section by pointing out that testimonial foundationalism is on equal footing with regard to skeptical challenges when compared to its rivals.

[6]Thomas Reid (1983) is viewed as the classical statement of testimonial fundamentalism, but see Coady (1992) for a contemporary restatement.

[7]See Jones (1999) and Sliwa (2012) for canonical defenses of the claim that testimony is a source of justification for moral beliefs.

[8]Some will deny that testimony provides any foundational justification for belief. See Hills (2009), Hopkins (2007), and McGrath (2009) for *pessimism* about moral testimony.

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3.1. Testimony is metaphysically light

Testimony is less mysterious compared to competitive views. For example, one competitor to testimonial foundationalism, intuitionism, is mysterious enough that some philosophers doubt whether there really is such a thing. Williamson complains of intuitionism that:

> Although mathematical intuition can have a rich phenomenology, even a quasi-perceptual one, for instance in geometry, the intellectual appearance of the Gettier proposition is not like that. Any accompanying imagery is irrelevant. For myself, I am aware of no intellectual seeming beyond my conscious inclination to believe the Gettier proposition. Similarly, I am aware of no intellectual seeming beyond my conscious inclination to believe Naïve Comprehension, which I resist because I know better.[9]

Even if we are not outright skeptics about the phenomenon, the exact conception of an intuition is fraught with controversy and disagreement.

Similarly, while it is plausible that perception justifies various beliefs, in the case of morality the issue is murkier since the perceptualist requires that we perceive moral properties, which is a very tendentious claim. The perceptualist will either need to provide a mechanism, such as cognitive penetration, to explain how the perceptual system is able to represent moral properties, or will have to appeal to empirical data showing that perception of morally valenced situations has the hallmarks of purely perceptual behavior (such as attention being attracted to a particular point of a stimulus involuntarily, and perception of morally valenced situations displaying binocular rivalry).[10]

Moral testimony, however, is just like non-moral testimony, where defeasible justification comes from believing or trusting the content of someone's communicative act. The view does not require any controversial assumptions about the metaphysical nature of testimony.

One could resist this claim by arguing that were one to accept some particular metaphysical thesis about intuition or perception, then the purported absence of mystery claimed on behalf of testimonial foundationalism is misleading. However, the target of my argument should not be taken as someone who has already been baptized in another theory. Rather, what I am stating is that for those who share Williamson's skepticism and parties that are on the fence, testimony requires less theoretical buy-in. There is a distinct lack of skepticism regarding the existence of testimony; no one denies that we make reports to each other. Furthermore, we can be confident that testimony has moral contents. I could tell you, for example, that knitting sweaters for penguins is the right thing to do. In this case, the content of the communicative act has moral contents. In sum, testimony does not face Williamsonian style concerns, nor does it share any *prima facie* problems with perceptualism.[11]

In short, the testimonial foundationalist takes on less controversial metaphysical theses when giving an account of the basic source of justification for moral beliefs. The perceptualist and the intuitionist, on the contrary, need to say much more about their preferred sources. Admittedly, this is a weak motivation for endorsing testimonial foundationalism, but what follows are weightier considerations for the view.

[9]Williamson, Timothy. 2007. *Philosophy of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. 217.

[10]See Block (2023) for discussion of the hallmarks of perception, and skepticism that morality meets those hallmarks.

[11]For more on the problems facing moral perception, see Jones (2023).

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3.2. Testimony nicely dovetails with moral education

I take it as a starting point that a large part of our moral education is verbal. As Hursthouse notes: "Sentences such as 'Don't do that, it hurts the cat, you mustn't be cruel', 'Be kind to your brother, he's only little', 'Don't be so mean, so greedy', are commonly addressed to toddlers."[12] This much is uncontroversial. But what makes testimonial foundationalism attractive is that the view accommodates a very plausible hypothesis about moral education: that it is almost impossible to imagine someone becoming a morally wise adult without substantial moral education. This particularly applies to children.

That children require a significant amount of moral instruction leads to the following puzzle. If moral knowledge was simply a matter of having the right intuitions or skillful coherent reasoning, then we should expect there to be "moral prodigies," similar to prodigies in other domains, such as mathematics. But it is doubtful that there are such children, able to discover the moral truths and live wisely on their own in the way that some children are able to pick up advanced mathematical skills or become piano savants.[13] This is not to deny that children are capable of making moral judgments, since empirical findings suggest that children as young as six months do appear to make such judgments.[14] It is less obvious that having an innate disposition to form moral judgments implies that children possess moral knowledge, however.[15] I will now move to discuss how we should understand prodigiousness, in order to see why the absence of moral prodigies favors testimonial foundationalism.

Prodigies make substantial, adult-level, contributions to whatever field in which their talent happens to land; a prodigy is "a child (typically 10 years or younger) who is performing at the level of a highly trained adult in a very demanding field of endeavor."[16] The prodigy's work is taken as meeting the epistemic gold standard for their area of expertise.[17] Because there is virtually no work on the epistemology of prodigiousness, I will assume that the best way to characterize the epistemic gold standard is as propositional justification. Here is one way to feel the intuitive pull of that claim: A book or paper on mathematics written by a Srinivasa Ramanujan or Terence Tao will not have its epistemic credentials scrutinized; people will take a book or paper seriously because Ramanujan or Tao are known to be highly skilled at deploying the methodology of mathematics. Perhaps this methodology is intuition, and Ramanujan and Tao have strong seeming states about the mathematical realm. However, it seems plausible that Ramanujan and Tao would still be prodigies even if we were all deceived by an evil

[12]Hursthouse 1999. 38.

[13]Readers may be reminded of discussions from Hursthouse (1999) and Annas (2004) regarding the difficulty children have in applying moral rules. Their discussions differ from my discussion here in that they draw conclusions about normative ethics, whereas my concerns here are solely epistemic.

[14]See Bloom (2013).

[15]Readers may wonder whether the findings Bloom presents in his work, *Just Babies*, provide evidence that children have an abundance of moral knowledge. Bloom himself does not take this to be the case. What Bloom takes his studies to show is that children, from a young age on, are disposed to make moral judgements. Notably, what judgment a child is likely to make correlates with their age, potentially with race, and mainly tracks whether or not an agent is likely to be cooperative. It is also worth noting that the final chapter of the book is about correcting the innate biases that children possess and carry into adulthood.

[16]See Feldman (1993).

[17]This is not to say that a prodigy is beyond needing instruction or cannot learn more about their area of expertise from collaboration, but that a prodigy has access to a domain of inquiry far ahead of his/her peers and on a par with experts. For example, Terence Tao may have learned much from his interaction with Paul Erdős, but what interested Erdős in Tao in the first place was Tao's remarkable mathematical aptitude.

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demon about the mathematical universe. This should push us towards thinking that factivity or reliably tracking the facts is not necessary for prodigiousness. Propositional justification is the epistemic property that is characteristic of prodigiousness.

Unlike in mathematics, no child has written a *Groundwork* or *Utilitarianism*.[18] Furthermore, were a book on the foundations of morality or applied ethics written by a child to appear, it would not be taken seriously. We would seriously scrutinize the epistemic credentials of the work and think that the child needs much more moral education in order to have something of import to say about moral matters, be they fundamental or applied. When a child makes a moral claim with the aim of contributing to a high-level discussion, their claim is not assumed to have the same level of epistemic justification that a mathematical prodigy's work has. We do not think that children are capable of discovering moral truths sitting in an armchair, or able to apply them properly. This systematic lack of moral expertise is why we do not ask children for moral advice.

Moral prodigies are a distinct possibility on rival epistemologies, however. According to intuitionism, it is in principle possible to achieve moral wisdom without ever having to engage with other individuals. Moral inquiry on this view is an entirely *a priori* enterprise, akin to mathematics. This is part of the appeal of intuitionism; it is an epistemic theory intended to cover several domains of inquiry, including mathematics and morality.[19] Consequently, children, in principle, are capable of achieving moral wisdom. The intuitionist may reply that, while it is in principle possible that moral wisdom could be achieved in such a way, in practice we generally do need to engage with other individuals or have real world experience in order to reach moral wisdom. This should raise some eyebrows. Intuitionism about mathematical knowledge predicts that there will be mathematical prodigies, which has been borne out by individuals such as Ramanujan and Tao. It is exceedingly odd then that there have been no equivalents in the moral domain, given that moral intuitionism parallels mathematical intuitionism. The point is this: the moral intuitionist is left in the awkward position of explaining away the absence of any moral prodigies despite not facing the issue of prodigies in other domains where intuitionism is considered a viable theory.

I want to emphasize that other views can, at most, accommodate the absence of prodigies, whereas testimonial foundationalism *predicts* the absence of moral prodigies. This feature comes from the core thesis of testimonial foundationalism, that the only source of propositional justification for moral belief comes from testimony. Prediction of data is typically considered a better indicator of correctness than mere accommodation of data, so granted the absence of moral prodigies, this strengthens the case for endorsing testimonial foundationalism. Furthermore, testimonial foundationalism readily recognizes the existence of prodigies in other domains, since the testimonial foundationalist intends for their view to only apply to the moral domain; they could embrace intuitionism as the correct epistemology of mathematics.

There are other advantages to testimonial foundationalism as well with regard to moral education. One advantage is that it preserves folk moral knowledge. One criterion for a successful theory of moral epistemology is that it should be able to explain how the folk have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs, since it certainly seems like they do possess such justification/knowledge. If our moral evidence is transferred solely through testimony, then it explains how it is that lay people have justified moral beliefs. In short,

[18]Of course, this remark is somewhat tongue in cheek. But the point is that while prodigies have produced influential results in fields like mathematics, nothing similar has happened in moral philosophy.

[19]See Huemer (2005) and Bedke (2019) for statements to this effect, and Chudnoff (2013) for a general formulation of contemporary intuitionism.

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someone without a serious philosophical education may justifiably believe (or know) that kicking dogs for fun is wrong because their mother told them so. Testimonial foundationalism thus avoids the problem of over-intellectualizing moral inquiry. In a similar vein, the testimonial view also holds an advantage over its rivals in that it is especially sensitive to the role that proverbs play in moral education. This is a marked lacuna in the metaethics literature, since proverbs are widely used across cultures to convey practical wisdom in a pithy manner.[20] In particular, what makes testimonial foundationalism stand out compared to rivals is that the view is open to claiming that the prevalence of proverbs is due to their function as encapsulated moral wisdom that is easy to remember and pithy enough to quickly express. For example, the proverb "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" expresses the claim that we should be satisfied with what we have and not risk a loss for a possible gain. Notably, we often say this proverb to each other when someone is considering acting in such a way that risks what they already possess, or to ourselves for the same end. My contention here is that proverbs function in ways similar to other methods of moral education.

Similarly, testimonial foundationalism recognizes the role that children's books and morality tales may play in the moral formation of children. Titles such as *Aesop's Fables*, *The Water Babies*, and *Cuore* in part exist because the authors wanted to impart values unto their readers or for the books to encourage moral behavior by serving as morality tales. The view recognizes how important texts such as these are to our moral development and codify what morally good and bad behavior are (at least by the lights of certain communities in which some given text is circulated). These texts serve not only as testimony of what is right, wrong, good, and bad, but have the pragmatic function of making moral lessons more likely to stick by presenting them in ways that are vivid and entertaining to read.

So what gives testimonial foundationalism a leg up when it comes to moral education? It better explains the role that instructors and mentors play in our moral development. To spell this out a bit more, insofar as we accept that there is a distinct lack of moral prodigies, then we are very dependent upon our mentors and role models for our moral learning. We could not achieve moral wisdom without them. This dependence is built into testimonial foundationalism, since instruction (testimony) is the way that propositional justification for moral belief is acquired.

3.3. Skeptical challenges

There are two kinds of skeptical challenges to moral epistemologies. Let us call these front-end challenges and back-end challenges. Front-end challenges consist in attacks on propositional justification. These can come in two kinds. The first are general attacks on justified moral belief, such as the regress challenge and the argument from disagreement, which try to provide defeaters for moral belief. Testimonial foundationalism will follow intuitionism and perceptualism in employing the typical foundationalist strategy, since it is structurally similar to both. However, other front-end challenges are targeted. We might think that intuitionism cannot grant justification because there is no mind-hand grasping abstracta in Plato's realm. Similarly, perceptualism faces the task of explaining how it is that perceptual experiences can have moral contents, which is empirically dubious at best. Like intuitionism and perceptualism, testimonial foundationalism has a targeted skeptical challenge: Justification Laundering.

The problem is as follows. If I were to tell someone that 'P' without having justification for 'P', then the testimony could come back to me, and if someone testifies

[20]For an account of the importance of proverbs in African Ethics, see Etieyibo 2023.

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to me that 'P', then I would be justified in believing that 'P'. This looks objectionably bootstrappy and someone might complain that justification cannot be granted in this way. Perhaps the complaint may point out that there is no obvious connection between being justified and the external world, so someone may be justified in their beliefs but siloed off from reality on this view.

However, insofar as this is a problem for testimonial foundationalism, it is not alone in facing this kind of issue. It is in good company with reflective equilibrium and coherentism. Let us imagine a coherentist who has an inconsistent belief set, and so their beliefs lack justification since they do not cohere. One way to become justified is to randomly drop an inconsistent belief, putting the beliefs into coherence. This is another bootstrappy way of becoming justified in a belief. Similarly, coherentism and reflective equilibrium both face the issue of being justified having no connection to the external world, so an individual with justified beliefs may be disconnected from reality on these views.[21]

Back-end challenges are reliability challenges, such as Street's (2006) Darwinian Dilemma and variations of the Benacerraf problem refitted for morality.[22] These challenges ask for an account of how it is that we are able to reliably track the moral facts. This is not a special problem for testimonial foundationalism but a general challenge for any moral epistemology. This should be clear given the above: Rival views also face objections about how justification is connected to reality.[23] Just like rival moral epistemologies, the testimonial foundationalist is free to help themself to any of the strategies for establishing the reliability of our moral beliefs. For example, they may help themself to the strategy developed in Enoch (2010), who claims that there is a pre-established harmony between our moral beliefs and the moral facts. Insofar as the testimonial foundationalist can help themself to a story about the reliability of our moral beliefs, they can explain how testimony from a speaker with an unjustified moral belief to a hearer generates a justified moral belief or moral knowledge.

The point is this: Testimonial foundationalism is no worse off than other moral epistemologies when it comes to skeptical challenges. That is, there are no special reasons stemming from skeptical concerns to dismiss testimonial foundationalism as a plausible moral epistemology. If that is right, then *unique foundation* is plausible: testimony could be the sole source of propositional justification for moral belief.

4. The "first testifier" problem for testimonial foundationalism

While I have discharged my *prima facie* case for testimonial foundationalism, there remains the obvious and serious problem facing testimonial foundationalism: the first testifier. Who is the first testifier? They are the individual with whom the testimonial chain begins.[24] Let us call him Ugg. Ugg is the first to testify about some moral matter, from where the rest of our testimonial practice continues. It is worth noting that other moral epistemologies all need to posit a first moral thinker, even if implicitly. For the intuitionist, there is a story needed for the first intuiter, the first person to intuit a moral truth. Similarly, the perceptualist needs to tell a story about the first perceiver of a moral

[21]It's worth noting that perceptualism and intuitionism will have these issues as well. Both views have to deal with issues of bad seemings, where an individual's seeming states are systematically false, but they are still justified believing them by the lights of each view.

[22]See Benacerraf (1973).

[23]To be clear, this isn't to say that justification is connected to reliability, but that there is a history of demanding epistemologies to provide an explanation of why we think we are tracking reality.

[24]There are surely many first testifiers, but I will speak as if there were only one for the sake of simplicity.

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property. That testimonial foundationalism is committed to the existence of Ugg is not a *prima facie* mark against the view, since rival views commit to their own versions of Ugg. Rather, Ugg is supposed to present a unique epistemic issue for testimonial foundationalism. I will now describe that issue.

Let us say that Ugg tells Grugg that harming fellow cave dwellers is (morally) wrong, and that Grugg believes as such upon hearing the testimony. In order for Grugg's moral belief to be an instance of moral knowledge, or justified moral belief, someone might claim that Ugg first needs to have moral knowledge or at least a justified moral belief that harming fellow cave dwellers is wrong, and then worry further about where that moral knowledge/belief came from.[25] That is, in order for a recipient's moral belief received via testimony to be justified or qualify as knowledge, the speaker's belief must carry the same epistemic status. The natural assumption is to say the following: the first person to give moral testimony must have had moral knowledge, and have gotten that knowledge via some other method. Someone would first have to know a moral fact to testify to it, but if testimony is the only basic source of moral knowledge, then there can be no first testifier in the chain. In a sentence: one might argue that Ugg would first have to know that it is wrong to harm fellow cave dwellers in order to be in a position to offer testimony that can provide knowledge, but there is no way that Ugg could come to know that moral fact, assuming testimonial foundationalism.[26]

Arguing that testimonial foundationalism fails on the grounds that Ugg needs to first know, or be propositionally justified in believing a moral claim in order to provide an epistemically successful instance of testimony assumes that the transmission view of testimony is correct. However, there are counterexamples demonstrating that a testifier need not know the contents of their testimony in order for that testimony to provide the recipient with a propositionally justified belief or knowledge. The example of the creationist teacher given in Lackey (2008) demonstrates as much.[27] In this case, an instructor is charged with presenting students the theory of evolution, and presents students with the best available evidence that supports the theory. However, the instructor herself does not know the truth of the theory, due to religious beliefs that preclude her from believing the theory. According to the transmission theory, it seems the students could not walk away with knowledge of the theory of evolution, since their instructor does not know it. That is the intuitively wrong conclusion in this case. The students can know the truth of the theory of evolution despite their instructor not knowing its truth.[28] Insofar as we are concerned with (moral) knowledge, the upshot is that a testifier merely needs to be reliable, rather than know the content of their statements. What this counterexample shows is that a speaker testifying that p need not believe p themselves in order for the hearer to know that p on the basis of that testimony.

[25]This concern forms the basis for the dismissal of testimonial foundationalism in McPherson (2020) and McGrath (2021).

[26]One might worry here about how Ugg and Grugg acquire moral concepts in the first place; if Ugg and Grugg hadn't first acquired moral concepts, how could they understand what the other is saying? There are two reasons this concern does not pose a unique problem for testimonial foundationalism. First, the acquisition of moral concepts is a general problem for all moral epistemologies, not just TF, so we can ask of the first intuitier or first perceiver how they acquired their moral concepts. The other reason is as follows. The testimonial foundationalist is not committed to the existence of the first testifier. Rather, the first testifier is a heuristic device that makes the "obvious objection" clear and salient to the reader. Insofar as the idea of a first testifier doesn't make sense, the concern about the acquisition of moral concepts becomes much more difficult to state, since asking how the first testifier acquired moral concepts ceases to make sense.

[27]Lackey, 2008. *Learning From Words*. 48–9.

[28]For additional counterexamples, see Lackey (2008).

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Rather, receiving the testimony that *p generates* the knowledge that *p*. Lackey's creationist teacher is intended to show that testimony is epistemically generative, rather than merely being a means of transferring epistemic goods from one person to another.[29]

Of course, there is a weaker version of transmission view, which holds that one needs to be *in a position to know,* or at least have propositional justification in order for testimony to successfully grant the hearer justification or knowledge. For example, we might think that the creationist teacher, while not herself knowing that the theory of evolution is true, either has propositional justification to believe the theory, or is in some way a vessel for the justification that is being transferred to the students. However, there are versions of the creationist teacher counterexample, which show that we should reject these further versions of the transmission view as well.[30] That is, these counterexamples show that it is not a necessary condition that a testifier bears any justification to believe the proposition to which they are testifying. Here is one of those examples: Hans undergoes neurosurgery, but is misinformed upon being released from the hospital that the surgeon modified Hans's occipital lobe to produce hallucinations of trees. As a result, Hans's justification for his perceptual beliefs are defeated. While walking away from the hospital, Hans has a veridical perceptual experience of a tree in the park, and tells his friend Bruno that he saw a tree in the park. Bruno does not know anything about Hans's operation, nor has any reason to doubt Hans's testimony, and forms the corresponding belief. As Lackey argues, intuitively it seems that Bruno's belief that there is a tree in the park is justified/knowledge. If this is right, then a testifier need not be in a position to know in order to give testimony that produces a propositionally justified belief in the hearer. If a testifier need not be in a position to know, then we can deny that testifiers must be at least an epistemic vessel, passing propositional justification along to recipients of a piece of testimony. The epistemic status of the initial person in a chain of testimony is irrelevant, since testimony is a generative source. So, testimonial foundationalism does not founder on other versions of the transmission view.

To be clear, this case does not purport to show that testimony is the only source of justification for beliefs about trees. Of course Bruno could get other evidence regarding trees in the park from his perceptual experience, rather than from Hans. Similarly, the creationist teacher case does not purport to show that testimony is the only source of propositional justification in the case of evolutionary science. Rather, these counter-examples are supposed to show that two conditions we might hold for epistemically good testimony are incorrect. And since the success of the "obvious objection" depends on either of those conditions holding, it fails as well. The creationist teacher example shows that it is not necessary that a speaker knows that *p* in order for the hearer's belief that *p*, formed as a result of the testimonial exchange, to be propositionally justified/knowledge. The case of Hans shows that it is not a necessary condition that the testifier be propositionally justified in believing that *p* in order for the hearer's belief that *p*, formed as a result of the testimonial exchange, to be propositionally justified/knowledge. What this shows is that we can have chains of epistemically good testimony that begin with a speaker who was not propositionally justified in believing the content of their testimony. The "obvious objection" is not successful.

All the testimonial foundationalist needs then, insofar as we are concerned, specifically, with moral knowledge, is for the first testifier to be reliable. But this is not a special problem for testimonial foundationalism, since all views that claim we have moral knowledge face general reliability challenges, such as the Darwinian Dilemma posed by Street (2006). The testimonial foundationalist is free to help themself to any of

[29]Lackey, 2008, *Learning From Words*. 73.

[30]Lackey, 2008. 63.

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the strategies for establishing the reliability of our moral beliefs. For example, they may help themself to the strategy developed in Enoch (2010), who claims that there is a pre-established harmony between our moral beliefs and the moral facts. Insofar as the testimonial foundationalist can help themself to a story about the reliability of our moral beliefs, they can explain how testimony from a speaker with an unjustified moral belief to a hearer generates a justified moral belief or moral knowledge. With the problem of the first testifier out of the way, and the positive methodological case established, I take it that I have cleared the main obstacles for establishing the plausibility of testimonial foundationalism.

Admittedly, I have not answered all the objections against holding testimony as a source of moral knowledge that are extant in the literature, such as concerns about moral deference and the importance of epistemic autonomy.[31] While these are important and influential objections, the task of responding to them on behalf of testimonial foundationalism deserves a fuller treatment in a separate paper. The task of this paper was solely to show that testimonial foundationalism is worthy of more attention than the immediate dismissal it receives in the literature.

5. Methodological lessons for all moral epistemologists

Although testimonial foundationalism may make justification of moral beliefs seem too easy, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat, what this really reveals is that there are two different research projects going on in moral epistemology. The first is the challenge of the structure of justification in ethics. This project aims to answer what methods or sources provide evidence for our moral beliefs and make our moral beliefs rational. Metaethicists are familiar with this project in the guise of asking whether intuition, perception, or testimony provide justification for belief. To show this, consider an analogy with perceptual epistemology. Just as in perceptual epistemology we help ourselves to perceptual seemings to give an account of justification, we also do not take ourselves to be solving problems about general skeptical worries like evil demons. That is the task of our second project, which is a more general worry about reliability and skepticism. This project aims at developing and solving various problems such as the Gettier problem, the Benacerraf challenge, or the related Darwinian Dilemma. While this might look like a special problem for testimonial foundationalism, this is a general problem. Regardless of one's theory of choice, all moral epistemologies face the reliability challenge. The testimonial foundationalist may help themselves to any of the solutions developed by people working in this second project.[32]

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[31]See McGrath (2009), McGrath (2019) ch. 3, and McGrath (2021).

[32]See Dogramaci (2022), Dworkin (1996), Vavova (2014), Vavova (2018), and Wielenberg (2014) for solutions to the reliability challenge.

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