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BEYOND WORDS: COMMUNICATION, TRUTHFULNESS, AND UNDERSTANDING

ABSTRACT

Testimony is an indispensable source of information. Yet, contrary to 'literalism', speakers rarely mean just what they say; and even when they do, that itself is something the hearer needs to realize. So, understanding instances of testimony requires more than merely reading others' messages off of the words they utter. Further, a very familiar and theoretically well-entrenched approach to how we arrive at such understanding serves to emphasize, not merely how deeply committed we are to testimony as a reliable source of information, but that epistemological questions about testimonial belief are – perhaps even must be – posterior to such a commitment. This result does not itself dictate any particular views on the epistemology of testimony. However, not only does the failure of literalism not support the view that the justificatory basis of testimony-based beliefs is importantly inferential; it in fact undermines a key premise in one important argument for the view that one needs independent, positive reasons for accepting a given testimonial report. More generally, the present paper illustrates how discussions of the epistemology of testimony might usefully interact with an examination of the epistemology of understanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

It's a familiar refrain in the testimony literature that linguistic communication constitutes an indispensable source of information: deprived of such knowledge as we acquire from others, our lives, intellectual and otherwise, would be different in ways we can only begin to imagine.[1] But while it's commonly agreed that testimony is for this reason of central epistemological import, relatively little attention has been paid to how linguistic communication actually proceeds. Thus, the common form of posing epistemological issues surrounding testimony goes something like this:

> Another tells me that *p*. Under what conditions, and in virtue of what, am I justified[2] in believing, or can I come to know, that *p*? Must I have independent reason for taking the speaker to be reliable? Must my interlocutor herself know that *p* in order for me to know it on her say-so? And wherein lies the epistemological significance of the

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fact that she has said that *p* – is it relevant only insofar as it discloses her own belief that *p*, or is there something epistemically significant to the fact that she has *told* me that *p*?

These, again, are the sorts of questions which dominate the literature on the epistemology of testimony. However, they're typically posed – as they are above – against the background of successful linguistic communication, in that the notion of someone's 'telling me that *p*' is taken as given and the question of *just how* we receive information from others via language is left unaddressed.[3] Nor is the latter question – concerning *the epistemology of understanding*, as we might call it[4] – irrelevant to questions concerning the epistemology of testimony. As I shall argue here, a certain familiar and theoretically well-entrenched approach to understanding linguistic communication has as a consequence the untenability of 'literalism' – an apparently widely-shared conception of how communication works. On that approach, moreover, questions about whether we should believe this or that particular testimonial report are – and in a certain sense must be – posterior to a commitment to testimony as a reliable source of information. Just on its own, this result does not dictate any particular views on the epistemology of testimony. However, not only does the failure of literalism, contrary to what has been suggested, not support the view that the justificatory basis of testimony-based beliefs is importantly inferential; it in fact undermines a key premise in one important argument for the 'inferentialist' view that one needs independent, positive reasons for accepting a given testimonial report.

2. AGAINST COMMUNICATIVE NAIVETÉ

I have claimed that much of the literature on testimony leaves unaddressed the question of just how we receive information from others via language. But surely the question answers itself: in testimony, we receive information from others *via language* – they put their thoughts into words, we grasp the meanings of those words and so understand what thoughts are being expressed; and from there we form (or fail to form) the corresponding beliefs ourselves. What's left to be explained?

To the extent that some view of linguistic communication dominates the testimony literature, if only implicitly, it is the one just articulated. The view in question is *literalism* – i.e., the belief that speakers typically mean just what the words they utter semantically express.[5] Thus, for instance, in the introduction to his survey of epistemological problems of testimony, Adler (2007, sect. 1) says that he will "restrict discussion to cases in which the speaker's utterance is meant literally, rather than rhetorically, playfully, figuratively, fictionally, or ironically." This assumption, he continues, is "made for the sake of economy, though the discussion tends toward the substantive claim that literal usage is primary." In a similar vein, in her discussion of how we "derive beliefs via hearing what others say," Ruth Millikan writes: "the most usual way that people understand

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the speech of others [is] by translating, without inference, into beliefs" (1984, 67). And Robert Audi, while insisting that some form of "semantic interpretation or, at any rate, semantic construal" is required for a belief to be properly testimony-based, rebuts the thought that "some kind of conscious activity of interpretation is generally required for testimony-based knowledge." "Typically," he says, "we simply understand what is said and believe it" (2006, 27).[6]

As the latter quotes suggest, literalism, as a view about speakers' communicative acts, invites a certain picture of testimonial "uptake" (Austin 1962, 117) or "comprehension" (Graham 2006, 84) – that is, a certain view of how we grasp the force and content of others' tellings. If speakers, as a rule, say just what they mean, understanding another's testimony typically requires nothing more than just reading the intended message off of what they say. In Elizabeth Fricker's terms, we *quasi-perceive*, or have *understanding-experiences* of, the force and content of others' speech acts (2003; cf. McDowell 1980/1998, 31; 1977, 166).[7] On this picture, there are of course exceptions to the rule – cases wherein what's communicated diverges from or goes beyond what's literally expressed. Gricean (1989) implicatures – where a speaker means what he/she says and communicates something else besides – are one example (see, e.g., Adler 1994). In such cases – as with instances of sarcasm, metaphor, etc. (Fricker 2003, 329 n. 6), or where what's said is ambiguous, referentially (Fricker 2003, sect. 3) or otherwise – some inference[8] is required to get to what (or, all that) the speaker means. But, the thinking goes, the standard or "paradigmatic [case] of everyday natural-language use" (Fricker 2003, 330; 2002, 376) is that in which the speaker means just what he/she says, and grasping that meaning requires nothing more, really, than an understanding of the language itself (cf. Millikan 1984, 69).

However, while literal usage might be *conceptually* prior to non-literal usage, and while understanding non-literal utterances may exploit a grasp of their literal meaning (Fricker 2003, 357 n. 33), there is very good reason to reject literalism and the view of testimonial uptake which it invites. In fact, the majority view among philosophers of language seems to be that literalism is obviously false. If anything, cases in which speakers mean just what they say are the exception. Of course, strictly speaking, implicatures – wherein one means *more* than what one says – pose no real problem for literalism. Nor do cases in which one is able, using knowledge one already has, to infer certain things from another's speech.[9] For it's widely agreed that in such cases one's belief is not properly testimony-based.

Even so, and setting such examples to one side, literalism says much more than that speakers most often speak non-figuratively, non-sarcastically, and so on. The latter may well be true. But, as a number of theorists[10] have pointed out, there are other ways of speaking non-literally – "of not meaning just what you say" (Bach 2006, 28). Chief among these is *loose* speech – something that's so common, familiar, and easily handled that it's typically overlooked. In such cases (unlike implicatures, properly so-called), the speaker does not mean what he/she says at all. At the same time, however, there's no obvious barrier to regarding

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what the hearer might come to believe on the basis of the speaker's utterance as genuinely testimony-based. For what's communicated and (suppose) believed by the hearer is closely and appropriately related to what's literally expressed by the words uttered.[11] (This is sometimes captured by speaking of what's communicated in such cases as an 'expansion', 'development', 'completion' or 'explicature' of what's literally expressed.) For this reason, and as against literalism, the prevalence of loose talk shows that what's semantically expressed very often underdetermines utterance content, and therefore that mere semantic competence won't suffice for grasping what others 'tell' us.

Reference determination in anaphora provides one illustration of the latter point. For instance, one who says

(1) She walked up the path to the house. The front door was painted bright red.

is naturally understood to be speaking of the front door of the same house as was already mentioned (Bezuidenhout 1998, 275). Similarly for instances of the pervasive phenomenon of 'sentence nonliterality', as Kent Bach (2001) calls it. Thus, in uttering each of the following sentences the speaker is naturally understood to mean, not what's expressed by the sentence itself, but some elaborated version thereof (such as that suggested by the addition of material in square brackets):

(2) The lecture begins at five *[give or take a minute]*.
(3) Holland is *[fairly]* flat.
(4) There's no more beer *[in the fridge]*.
(5) Amherst is 90 miles *[or so]* from Boston.
(6) Rick and Ann are engaged *[to each other]*.
(7) Jack has *[exactly]* three cars.
(8) I haven't eaten *[today]*.
(9) Jean *[deliberately]* lit the match.
(10) Mahler's 3rd isn't very good *[as compared with his other symphonies]*.
(11) *[Our friend]* John plays *[the violin]* well.
(12) The park is some *[significant]* distance from where I live.[12]

Now, it may be tempting to suppose that our failing, like likely utterers of sentences such as (1)–(12), to be fully explicit, is simply a generally useful shortcut that we can avoid using when the situation calls for it. But even the most carefully drawn-up contract or most scrupulously explicated argument leaves room for *some* possible misconstruals, however unlikely or 'perverse'.[13] Further, there's good reason to suppose that speaking loosely is pretty much forced upon us by what Stephen Levinson (2000) calls the 'articulatory bottleneck' – the comparatively slow rate at which actual speech signals can be generated.[14] For these reasons, while across-the-board perfect literality might be possible (as they say) 'in principle', in reality it's very likely no more feasible than the 'in principle' possibility of not relying upon what others say.

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Why, in light of the prevalence of loose talk, is literalism such a natural view to take? Not to be underestimated is the fact, mentioned above, that speaking loosely is as familiar and pervasive as it is. Also, the general effortlessness and seeming automaticity of whatever inferences are involved in getting us, in such cases, from what's literally expressed to the actual utterance content suggests that those inferences are *not* best construed as instances of conscious or deliberate reasoning. And that too helps account for our failure to see them for what they are. Here, a comparison with perception may be illuminating. In vision, say, it undoubtedly appears as though we simply open our eyes and see – it seems as though the eyes are, as it were, simply a window onto the world. Such phenomenology aside, though, no one doubts that a good deal of processing by the visual system, itself employing certain 'assumptions', is involved in the generation of this or that perceptual experience.

Likewise in the case of linguistic communication: it does indeed *seem* as though we simply 'hear' what others communicate;[15] but as cases such as the foregoing serve to illustrate, there is in fact a fair amount of processing underlying our grasp of what others 'tell us'. Whether such processing is aptly described as 'inference' is something about which people's intuitions differ strongly. If 'inference' and 'interpretation' suggest a more or less conscious, ratiocinative process, Audi's 'construal' (2006, 27) might be preferable. But such (partly) terminological matters do not affect the central point here: viz., that 'the immediacy of understanding', as we might call it, is just as illusory as 'the immediacy of vision'; while there is typically no *conscious* interpretation (etc.) involved in utterance comprehension, some interpretive activity or processing *must* occur in *some* form. For we have no trouble at all understanding what typical utterers of sentences like (1)–(12) mean, even though the latter goes well beyond what's explicitly said.[16] So, while I will tend at times to follow certain others' lead in speaking of testimonial uptake as being 'inferential', it should be remembered that this term is not intended to bear any philosophical weight: it is the last point just made, whatever terms exactly are used to express it, that is the crucial one for present purposes.

3. THE FALSITY OF LITERALISM DOES NOT FAVOR INFERENTIALISM

It is that last point too, as illustrated by examples like (1)–(12), which forms the basis of Anne Bezuidenhout's (1998) response to Tyler Burge. As is well-known, Burge (1993) has suggested (though he himself doesn't use the term) that 'fundamentalism' (Coady 1992) about testimonial warrant is correct – i.e., that testimonial warrant is somehow basic; that it's on a par with, and not reducible to, that conferred by perception, memory, induction, and so on. Thus, the 'Acceptance Principle' he defends states: "*A person is entitled to accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so*" (1993, 467). Burge's case for the Acceptance Principle is subtle and involved. Of particular

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relevance here, though, is the view of linguistic communication to which Burge's argument appears to commit him.

In deductive reasoning, Burge says, memory introduces no new propositional content; it serves merely to preserve such content, making it available for subsequent use (462).[17] While its functioning properly is "a background condition for [such] reasoning's success" (463), memory is irrelevant to the justifiedness of the outputs of deduction. For, "[u]nlike inference, it is not a transition or move" (465).[18] Analogously, Burge says, in interlocution, perception serves merely as a conduit through which content is passed, via language, from the mind of one rational agent to that of another.[19] (It is the *prima facie* rationality of the source that is crucial in providing the *a priori prima facie* warrantedness of beliefs based on testimony, according to Burge (469ff.)) This is why, as Burge sees it, it's possible for testimonial warrant to be basic in the way that fundamentalism requires.

As Bezuidenhout observes, however, Burge seems to assume that linguistic communication involves merely the encoding and decoding of thoughts, with the propositional contents thereof being preserved throughout. And while such an encoding-decoding process might be purely preservative, we've just seen that linguistic communication seems to be an inherently *inferential* process. Further, since Bezuidenhout, following Burge,[20] takes inferential processes to be automatically justificationally relevant to the beliefs to which they give rise (1998, 269), we have the result that the warrantedness of testimonial beliefs does not derive merely from their having a rational source after all:

> presumably it is a grasp of what is expressed by a speaker's utterance that forms a basis for a listener's acceptance of the speaker's testimony. But if what is expressed must be inferred .... [o]ne's entitlement to any beliefs based on an understanding of what is expressed will depend on the cogency of such inferential processing. Thus, the processes underlying verbal communication will play a role in justifying beliefs based on testimony, contrary to Burge's suggestion. (282–3)

Does the falsity of literalism really entail that one's entitlement to believe what another says cannot be a function merely of their having testified to it? Does it support 'inferentialism', the view that "one cannot gain a justified belief about a proposition solely on the basis of hearing someone assert that proposition (i.e., one needs independent grounds to justify that belief)" (Pritchard 2004, 101)? Not obviously. Even if some processing or inference (in the relevant sense[21]) is required for testimonial uptake, it does not follow that "one's entitlement to any beliefs based on an understanding of what is expressed will depend on the cogency of such inferential processing" (1998, 283). For not everything involved in arriving at a given belief is *ipso facto* justificatorily relevant to it; and even if "*inferential* processes *do* play a role in justification" (269), one's testimonial beliefs are 'based on' such inferences only insofar as the latter are required for recognizing that another has testified *that p*. Nevertheless, one's warrant *for forming the corresponding belief oneself*

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could be entirely a matter of another's having, as we say, 'given their word' (cf. Adler (2007, sect. 8.1).[22,23]

4. THE PRESUMPTION(S) OF TRUTHFULNESS AND RELIABILITY

If, as I have just argued, the falsity of literalism does not itself favor inferentialism about testimonial warrant, this should not be taken as evidence that the epistemology of understanding has no bearing upon the epistemology of testimony. For, at minimum, the falsity of literalism together with an independently plausible account of how linguistic communication does proceed, if not via the simple decoding of others' words, in fact undermines a premise in one important argument for the inferentialist view. To show this, I begin (this section) with the positive account of linguistic communication; I then turn (in the next) to the pro-inferentialist argument I have in mind.

According to one familiar and well-entrenched view, what enables speakers to communicate what they intend, even when this departs from what they strictly speaking say, is the fact that our conversational exchanges are governed by something like the Gricean (1989) Co-operative Principle (CP).[24] Or, better, they are governed by the mutual presumption that others are conforming to CP (see Bach & Harnish 1979, 62–5; Bach 2006, 24; 2001). Grice himself suggested various specific sub-maxims, under the headings of 'Quantity', 'Quality', 'Relation' and 'Manner'; and he may thereby have introduced some redundancies. For instance, Robert Harnish (1976) suggests that CP may be compressed to the presumption that others say what they do with the intention of being maximally relevantly informative; and Bach (1994c, 12) says that "it is arguable that being co-operative simply consists in being truthful and relevant," and that *that* is all we (as hearers) need to presume others are striving to be, and all that we (as speakers) need others to assume about *us*, for communication to succeed.

Still, neither Harnish, Bach, nor (to my knowledge) any other Gricean theorist suggests that we can dispense with what's of special relevance to the testimony debate – namely, the idea that 'saying' itself presumes one's striving to satisfy certain credal-epistemic conditions. For chief among the Gricean maxims is that of Quality – 'Try to make your contribution one that is true' – along with its two more specific sub-maxims:

(i) 'Do not say what you believe to be false;' and
(ii) 'Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.' (1989, 27)

Quality, then, concerns more than just sincerity: presuming that others are striving to be cooperative requires, not just that one regards them as expressing their beliefs; it requires as well that one takes them to see themselves as having good ('adequate') reason ('evidence', warrant, justification) for those beliefs. Thus,

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Catherine Elgin suggests that we might think of these submaxims as addressing, respectively, sincerity and "competence" (2002, 299).

Now, Elgin herself thinks that the first sub-maxim of Quality needs revision. Since it's doubtful that Amherst is exactly 90 miles from Boston, when I utter (the unembellished) (5), I am speaking falsely, and knowingly so. Thus, Elgin says, I am violating the first sub-maxim of Quality. Whereas, she says, "I have not spoken irresponsibly. For we do not construe my remark strictly. Rather we take it to have a tacit, but generous margin of error" (303); and so understood, my remark doesn't violate Quality after all. What this shows, Elgin thinks, is that (i) should be revised to read:

(i*) 'Do not say what you believe to be misleading,'

with (ii) revised similarly to enjoin the having of evidence for the non-misleadingness, rather than the truth, of what one says (303–4).

However, so long as we interpret CP as applying to what one communicates – to one's overall "conversational contribution" – rather than to what one strictly and literally says (i.e., to what the words one actually utters semantically express),[25] the suggested revision is unnecessary. Indeed, it is because the unqualified (5) is obviously false and the speaker is presumed to be *truthful* that we take her to mean the qualified version thereof. The literal falsity of (5), together with the presumed truthfulness (not merely non-misleadingness) of the speaker is in this way required to explain why *that* (viz., (5)) is not what the speaker is taken to mean. And so too with the rest of (1)–(12): the speaker is understood as intending the relevant embellished propositions because such is required to preserve the assumption that they're conforming to CP and its various (unrevised) maxims and sub-maxims.[26]

Of course, those who oppose fundamentalism about testimonial warrant tend to emphasize the possible failure of speakers' sincerity and/or competence – hence, they think, the need for one to have some independent grounds for supposing that the speaker is reliable if one's testimony-based beliefs are to be justified. Such epistemological-normative questions aside, however, as a *descriptive* matter it seems clear that we expect both that speakers not only strive for but often exhibit (sincerity and) competence (Adler 2007, sect. 7.1; Audi 2006, 32), and that the sincere tellings of competent speakers are more often than not true; whatever our views on whether those beliefs are warranted and why, we simply would not believe others as often as we do if this were not the case. And it is only because we expect others' tellings to be (among other things) *true* that, when a face-value construal of what a speaker is communicating is, say, some obvious falsehood – e.g., as with the unembellished (8) – other things equal[27] we seek some other way of interpreting their utterance.

These same points can be put in terms of the Gricean approach articulated above. If we didn't think that people's striving to have good – i.e., truth-conducive – grounds for the beliefs they express was an effective means to their actually having such, the second sub-maxim of Quality would be doing no work: we

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should not expect or require speakers to be anything more than sincere. And it's natural to think that what lies behind our concern about such matters as the sub-maxims of Quality address is precisely our abiding interest in the truth, our belief in its attainability via such means as good evidence, and our confidence that such grounds (evidence, reasons) as we take to be adequate generally are. Our presuming such things – in general, or with regard to others' communicative contributions in particular – is of course perfectly compatible with their falsity in a given case, and indeed with the possibility of massive error (Graham 2000).[28] But the point here is, once again, the descriptive-psychological one of how, as a matter of fact, hearers narrow the search space of possible interpretations of others' utterances. The Gricean account has it that we do so (in part) by presuming their truthfulness – i.e., their sincerity and competence – which, as a descriptive matter and for the reasons just given, implies the presumption of the general *reliability* of testimony.[29] But if that's right, and if the presumption of truthfulness is required just to arrive at what a speaker is *telling* one, questions about whether/why one should believe what one's told can only arise against the background of the presumed reliability of testimony – on the whole, or in this particular case.

This argument may seem too quick. For the discussion to this point has centered on cases of loose speech. So, it might be said, at most what's been shown is that *in such cases* – as well, perhaps, as in the case of implicatures, and so forth – the general reliability of testimony is presumed. But, the thinking goes, where literal speech is concerned, to understand what we're being told we need simply take what the person says at face value. *Here*, the question can arise as to whether we should believe what they tell us without our having in any way presumed testimony's reliability.

However, even bracketing concerns about the frequency and feasibility of perfectly literal, fully explicit speech (see above), this response misconstrues the role CP and the various maxims play in linguistic communication. Grice himself introduced his maxims of conversation to explain how implicatures work; and others have suggested that they can also be used to explain, e.g., loose speech. But, as Bach says, "this does not mean, as is often supposed, that they're idle otherwise" (2006, 24). For even if what the speaker means *is* exactly what he/she says, the hearer must recognize this, even though *that* (that the speaker means exactly what he/she says) is not something that's explicitly communicated. And here too CP plays a role: if the speaker is taken to be speaking literally, it is because that preserves the assumption that the speaker is observing CP (27; Bach 1994a, 280). (So, insofar as literality is the null or default hypothesis for utterance interpretation, that is because it is regarded as the default way of conforming to CP and its various sub-maxims.) Thus, the point is quite general: if a broadly Gricean picture of linguistic communication is correct, the presumption of testimony's reliability is essential to grasping what others communicate, even where they mean exactly what they say.

Of course, in a given case,[30] that presumption may be over-ridden: one may have reason to doubt that what another tells one is true, that they have adequate

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evidence for it, or that they're being sincere. But the presumption of truthfulness is still required in such cases in order just to arrive at an understanding of the communicated content. Thus, if I saw Jane having breakfast earlier in the day, but hear her now say to you,

(8′) "I haven't eaten,"

I'll have no tendency to revise my former belief, but instead take her to be dissembling (perhaps out of politeness). What I'll take her not to be speaking truly *about*, however, is whether she's eaten *today*. Why? Because that, I assume, is what she means to communicate, and what a typical speaker would mean by such a claim. And she and they are able to do so, and able to be taken as doing so, because of the presumption of truthfulness and the manifest falsity of what they strictly speaking say.

Likewise, if I've never heard our friend John, the violinist, play, and you say,

(11′) "John plays well,"

I may not believe what you're telling me, because I know you're tone deaf. But I have no trouble understanding that you're expressing the (by your lights) true proposition that our friend John plays the violin well, even though *that* isn't expressed by the words you actually utter. So here too: that the presumption of truthfulness is over-ridden in a given case doesn't mean that it's not operative therein. On the contrary, it is required for the recovery of what's meant. And on the speaker's side, of course, it's exploited for purposes of communicating what they do – even if, as sometimes happens, their intent in doing so is to deceive.

Just as the current argument is compatible with our having a quite critical or measured response to various testimonial acts, rather than an unthinkingly credulous one, it's compatible too with the suggestion that we have very good empirical evidence for what's being presumed. In Adler's (1994, 2002, 2007) terms, the predominance of truthful testimony may be among the background conditions, backed by experience, upon which one relies in responding to a given testimonial act. However, if it's correct that the presumption of truthfulness is required just to understand what it is that speakers are *telling* us, our finding that what they tell us is most often true exploits that same presumption. This is not to suggest that such a finding is somehow faulty or insignificant – any more than it's to imply that the abundant evidence we have for the reliability of perception, say, since much of *it* presumes perception's reliability, can or should be discounted. The point is to expose just how fundamental a role the relevant presumption plays in our cognitive-communicative lives.

The present argument bears some superficial resemblance to C. A. J. Coady's (1992, ch. 9) Davidsonian (1984) argument for the reliability of testimony, understood as an attempt to show that testimony and the beliefs expressed therein *must* be mostly true if we're even to have anything recognizable as linguistic communication. Subject to certain qualifications, something like this may be a contingent, empirical truth about the ontogeny of the institution of testimony. Thus, one might think, a language wouldn't serve its purpose of enabling the

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conveyance of information, and so would not persist, unless many of the ostensible reports therein were reliable. But that's far from a transcendental argument for the necessary reliability of testimony.[31] And neither is the current argument intended as such. That argument, once again, is that the presumption of truthfulness – which, I've suggested, cannot be hived off from the presumption, however provisional, of the truth of a given testimonial act – is needed to interpret others' 'tellings' – to *get to* that to which they're testifying. This epistemological point does not entail such conceptual-metaphysical claims as that a large portion of beliefs are guaranteed *a priori* to be true, or that testimony is necessarily reliable.

Still, it's worth considering one very recent response to Coady's 'transcendental' argument, since it bears upon the current one. To the suggestion that utterance interpretation requires a presumption of truthfulness, Tomoji Shogenji says: "This may be correct psychologically, but there is no logical reason that the subject must make this presumption. In order to interpret utterances, the subject only needs the hypothesis that testimony is generally credible" (2006, 337). As a logical point, that is correct. But if our concern is with how linguistic communication works, the issue *is* the psychological one of how hearers interpret others' utterances. That they're able to do so is impressive, since a speaker could, in principle, mean anything by their utterance. What the hearer needs is some way of dramatically reducing the search space of possible interpretations (cf. Levinson 2000, sect. 1.3). The presumption – the "defeasible mutual contextual belief" (Bach & Harnish 1979, 62ff.) or "procedurally demanded bias" (Adler 2002, 154) – that testimony is generally credible is designed to do just that. Whereas, the mere availability of truthfulness as a *hypothesis* won't help the hearer unless he has some reason, however defeasible, to adopt it. And if he's got the latter, he'll have grounds for the corresponding presumption and an actual *bias* towards trust (Adler 1994, 272[32]).

5. THE MYTH OF THE NEUTRALITY OF UNDERSTANDING

As Julie Jack has said, "it need not be assumed that, because a kind of belief is a starting point for a given method of knowledge-acquisition, therefore it is epistemically basic" (1994, 189). Thus, even if the presumption of the reliability of testimony is, in the manner just outlined, fundamental to our communicative practices, the basicness of our entitlement to rely on what others tell us does not immediately follow.[33] Even so, the preceding discussion does block one important argument for inferentialism about testimonial warrant.

It may well be a mistake, as Jonathan Adler (2007, sect. 7.1; 2002, 158) suggests, to suppose that an empirical or *a posteriori* approach to testimonial warrant requires, as Burge implies, that "we should remain neutral or skeptical of information unless we have empirical grounds for thinking it trustworthy" (Burge 1993, 473 n. 13). Nevertheless, that such neutrality is the natural and appropriate view figures in at least one prominent argument for inferentialism. That argument, which is most evident in the work of Elizabeth Fricker, runs as follows.

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A competent hearer's "epistemic given, her starting point" is the fact that someone has told her that *p* (Fricker 2002, 376). That starting point is furnished by "our ability to hear-say – that is, to hear[34] the content and force of what is said or told to one" (Fricker 2003, 343). That ability no doubt requires complex processing at the subpersonal level (326 n. 1, 363); and sometimes even effortful, conscious processing may be needed (sect. 3.2). But in paradigmatic cases of language use – wherein language is used literally, as opposed to ironically, sarcastically, or metaphorically (Fricker 2006a, 229, 246–7 nn. 7 & 8; 2003, 329 n. 6) – "at the conscious, personal level" (2003, 363), we most often simply quasi-perceive, or have understanding-experiences of, others' tellings. The *epistemic* issue is under what circumstances the hearer is entitled to form the corresponding belief herself (2002, 376). Assuming that she is a mature speaker and no longer in the 'developmental phase' (Fricker 1995, 402), the suggestion that she is default entitled to do so "is an epistemic charter for the gullible and undiscriminating" (Fricker 1994, 126, 145). For, as "we masters of commonsense linguistics and speech act theory" (2002, 379; cf. 1995, 399; 1994, 137–8, 145–6; 2006b, 20–1) well know, testimony involves a distinctive kind of epistemic link – one which is reliable, flukes aside, only where the speaker is both competent and sincere (*ibid.*); and as we're also well aware, speakers can fail to be either.[35] These commonsense facts provide a *prima facie* case against the view that the hearer has a presumptive right to believe, and in favor of the view that she must possess positive and independent reasons for supposing the speaker reliable in order to have the right to believe what she has been told.[36]

The application of the present discussion to this argument is straightforward. While it may be "a fact of *phenomenology* that we enjoy … understanding experiences, quasi-perceptions of meaning" (Fricker 2003, 325; emphasis added), the literalist assumption that nonliterality is restricted to a relatively small proportion of cases (metaphor, sarcasm, etc.) is highly contentious; and even where a speaker means just what he says, that fact is not simply given. Further, as we've seen, whatever the exact details of how the relevant processing is carried out (cf. n. 21), on the Gricean account (but see too n. 26) "commonsense linguistics and speech act theory" itself involves the presumption of the general reliability of testimony. Insofar, then, as comprehension is the "starting point for knowledge from words" (Jack 1994, 189), it is not arrived at in an epistemically neutral fashion: the hearer does not, and in a certain sense cannot, begin in a position of neutrality as to the trustworthiness of what another says. From this perspective, the question is not how we earn the right to move out of the default neutral position – on the present view, such neutrality is no less of a myth than that speakers most often mean exactly what they say. The question, rather, is this: given that "insincerity and honest error are both perfectly possible" (Fricker 1994, 145–6) – given that someone's saying something is one thing, its being so is another (Fricker 2006b, 20–1)[37] – does being entitled to believe what one is told require that one go beyond the bare 'positive bias' (Adler 2002, 142) position? Does it require that one have some further, independent evidence for the speaker's authoritativeness on her topic? Perhaps it does; but if so, that

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is not because of, but in spite of, what is involved in understanding what others tell us.

6. CONCLUSION

Testimony is an indispensable source of information. Yet speakers rarely mean just what they say. And even when they do, that itself is something that needs to be inferred. A broadly Gricean story of how, in light of these facts, linguistic communication proceeds serves to emphasize, not merely how deeply committed we are to testimony as a reliable source of information, but that epistemological questions about testimonial belief are – perhaps even must be – posterior to such a commitment. In itself, this fact does not dictate answers to the questions which dominate discussions of the epistemology of testimony. However, not only does the failure of literalism not support the view that the justificatory basis of testimony-based beliefs is importantly inferential; it in fact undermines a key premise in one important argument for the view that one needs independent, positive reasons for accepting a given testimonial report. More generally, it is hoped, the preceding illustrates how discussions of the epistemology of testimony might usefully interact with an examination of the epistemology of understanding.

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NOTES

1 See, e.g., what Adler (2007, sect. 1), calls 'the Far-Reaching Dependence Thesis'. Such pervasive dependence, along with a widely-shared anti-sceptical outlook, gives rise to an equally widely-held '*Commonsense Constraint*', as Elizabeth Fricker calls it – i.e., the view that "testimony is, at least on occasion, a source of knowledge" (1995, 394). It is against the background of these twin theses that discussions of the epistemology of testimony typically take place.

2 Here and throughout, I use 'justification' and 'entitlement', as well as Plantinga's (1993) more deliberately neutral 'warrant', to refer to whatever property must be added to true, ungettiered belief in order for it to constitute knowledge.

3 Which is to be distinguished from issues concerning the proper definition of 'testimony', which has received attention (e.g., Coady 1992, ch. 2; Graham 1997).

4 This label was suggested to me by Sandy Goldberg.

5 What I'm calling 'literalism' is closely related to both what Sperber & Wilson (1986a) call 'The Code Model' of linguistic communication and what Recanati (2002) calls the 'Anti-Inferentialist' view.

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6 It is not clear whether all those just cited actually endorse literalism, as defined here – Adler's and Audi's positions on testimony, for example, certainly do not require it. Still, the cited passages at least sound friendly to that view.

7 Some go further still, arguing that testimony constitutes a form of "natural teleperception" (Millikan 1984, 309; 2004, ch. 9; cf. McDowell 1980/1998, 45).

8 Or processing of some form; I return the matter of how it is best categorized, and whether this matters to the present argument, presently.

9 For instance, if I infer from your accent that you're Scottish; or if you tell me that Vancouver lost the game, and I infer that Calgary must now be in first place. In the former case, the relevant information is, in Neale's terms, merely "made available" (Neale 1990, 74) – i.e., it can be reasonably inferred from the utterance, but irrespective of its force and content. In the latter case, what is communicated *is* essential to the belief the hearer forms, but only as a premise used in conjunction with other beliefs he/she already has. For some similar examples, see Lackey (2006, 3), Audi (2006, 26–7), and Fricker (2002, 376–7).

10 These include Kent Bach (1994b, 2001), Raymond Gibbs & Jessica Moise (1997), Robyn Carston (1988), François Recanati (1989, 1993), and Sperber & Wilson (1986a,b). There are of course disagreements among these theorists – not least, concerning the proper conception of 'what is said'. But they agree that what's communicated by a given utterance is often other than, though closely related to, the literal content of the uttered words.

11 On the latter as a reasonable condition on a belief's counting as properly testimony-based, see Lackey (2006, 3).

12 (2) and (3) are taken/adapted from Sperber & Wilson (1986b), (4) and (5) from Elgin (2002), (6)–(8) from Bach (2001), (9) from Bach (1994a), (10) from Bach (1994b), and (11) and (12) are from Saul (2002), who is herself discussing examples of Sperber & Wilson's and Carston's, respectively. Note that just as there are some philosophy of language disputes about whether 'what is said' in (1)–(12) does/doesn't include the bracketed material (see n. 10, above), there is some (though much less) disagreement about whether (or in which cases) that material is somehow present in the 'logical form' of the utterance and therefore linguistically 'determined', 'controlled', or 'provided', if only by covert/unpronounced elements of the sentence uttered. (See, e.g., Stanley 2002.) But this issue doesn't affect the present point either: whether we regard the processes involved as semantic or merely pragmatic, some process*ing* is required in such cases to arrive at the communicated proposition, since the latter goes beyond what's explicitly presented, and since what *is* explicitly presented can be used to communicate various things, depending upon the situation. This is the essential feature of such examples, as far as the current argument goes. That worry forestalled, I will continue here to betray my own linguistic sympathies by also speaking of such cases as involving the communication of information that goes beyond what's literally expressed, semantically encoded, or what have you.

13 Cf. Wittgenstein: "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (1953, para. 242).

14 "The bottleneck is constituted by the remarkably slow transmission rate of human speech (conceived of as the rate at which phonetic representations can be encoded as

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discriminable speech signals), with a limit in the range of 7 syllables or 18 segments per second .... In contrast, the psycholinguistic evidence suggests that all other aspects of speech production and comprehension can run at a much higher rate" (Levinson 2000, 28; quoted by Bach 2001, 262).

15 See Pritchard on "the phenomenological pull of the default model of the epistemology of testimony" (2004, 104), the latter being the view that "provided there are no special grounds for doubt, then one can gain a justified belief in a proposition simply by hearing someone assert that proposition" (101–2).

16 Cf. Sosa: " ... our awareness of testimony as testimony itself relies on instrumental knowledge. We must interpret our interlocutors, so as to discern the thoughts or statements behind their linguistic displays. From oral or written displays we can tell what someone is saying, and thinking" (2006, 120).

17 For doubts about such claims about memory, see Dokic (2001) and Christensen & Kornblith (1997, 15ff).

18 "Purely preservative memory introduces no subject matter, constitutes no element in a justification, and adds no force to a justification or entitlement. It simply maintains in justificational space a cognitive content with its judgmental force. Like inference, it makes transitions of reason possible, but contributes no propositional content. Unlike inference, it is not a transition or move – so it is not an element in a justification." (465)

19 "In interlocution, perception of utterances makes possible the passage of propositional content from one mind to another rather as purely preservative memory makes possible the preservation of propositional content from one time to another." (481) "Without perception, one could not acquire beliefs from others. But perception plays a triggering and preservative role, in many cases, not a justificatory one" (466).

20 As she reads him, at least. Burge's views on the matter of inferentiality and justificatory relevance are rather complex – see Recanati 2002, and the next note, below.

21 That sense being, as noted above, consonant with thinking that the relevant 'interpretation' – the relevant "transition[s] or move[s]" (Burge 1993, 465) – typically doesn't resemble anything like conscious, deliberate, or logical reasoning. Certain portrayals of the relevant inferences, including by Grice himself, are sometimes taken to invite the latter idea. But it must be remembered that Grice himself was attempting a 'rational reconstruction' of hearers' inferences, rather than a psychologically accurate rendering thereof. Bach writes: "When [Grice] illustrated the ingredients involved in recognizing an implicature, he was enumerating the sorts of information that a hearer needs to take into account, at least intuitively, and exhibiting how this information is logically organized. He was not foolishly engaged in psychological speculation about the nature of or even the temporal sequence of the cognitive processes that implements that logic" (2006, 27; cf. Saul 2002). Further, it's worth noting that it *is* conscious, deliberate, and/or 'logical' reasoning that people typically have in mind when they affirm/deny that testimonial warrant is inferential. And it's arguable that Burge believes that 'inference' refers to something that's justificatorily relevant only insofar as it's taken in this sense: see Recanati (2002); compare too Bezuidenhout (1998, 282–3 n. 16).

22 As I've just implied, I think that Bezuidenhout's seeing inference as obviously a justifying and not just an 'enabling' factor in testimonial belief is abetted by her use of terms which have both a psycho-causal and an epistemological reading – as is the case with 'a basis for' and 'based on', in the passage quoted just above.

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23 Cf. Audi: "Even when one must think about what is said and laboriously interpret it … it does not follow that one's belief finally arising from accepting the message one discerns is inferential" (2006, 27).

24 "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (1989, 26).

25 As Wilson & Sperber (2002, 585–6) note, Grice himself isn't entirely clear about which of these two things he takes CP to concern.

26 For reasons similar to those Elgin cites, Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1986a, 1986b, 2002) and Van der Henst et al. (2002) argue, against Grice, that our conversations aren't governed by a maxim – or convention (Lewis 1975) – of literal truthfulness. For reasons just indicated, however, this needn't tell against the Gricean approach. The relative virtues of the Gricean and Relevance-Theoretic approaches is a large topic which cannot be satisfactorily addressed here. Here, it suffices to note that there's no obvious conflict between the view being articulated here and that expressed by Wilson & Sperber in summarizing their discussion of truthfulness and relevance: "We agree that, at least in most cases, a hearer expects to be informed of something when he attends to an utterance. We agree with Grice that 'false information is not an inferior kind of information; it just is not information' …. So, yes, hearers expect to be provided with true information. But there is an infinite supply of true information which is not worth paying attention to. Actual expectations are of relevant information, which because it is information is also true. However, we have argued that there just is no expectation that the true information communicated should be literally or conventionally expressed, as opposed to being explicated or implicated …." (2002, 627–8).

27 That is, unless we have some specific reason – their past mendacity, the difficulty of the topic, etc. – to suspect the speaker's competence or sincerity, at least on the subject in question, and so on.

28 That possibility being one which certain Davidsonian arguments for the necessary reliability of testimony fail to allow for (Graham 2000). The differences between such arguments and the current one is discussed further below.

29 Compare Davis (2002, 532–3) and Van Cleve (2006, 53–4). (Van Cleve is discussing Reid's views on testimony, which are not necessarily his own.)

30 I think Adler (2007, sect. 6; 2002, 148) is correct when he says, as against those who advertise the frequency of false testimony (most notably, perhaps, Fricker – see n. 35, below), that this is an exaggeration due to the fact that we're "much more attentive to, and we recall much better, erroneous testimony." The latter is no doubt owing in part to the fact that mistakes in matters wherein we rely on others' opinions can be costly; but also, deliberate deceit can have moral resonance, and one supposes that there's very good reason why it would be important for us, as social creatures, to not forget our having been mislead, and by whom. (For a brief overview of some related discussion and findings, see Koenig & Harris 2005.)

31 For some criticisms of Coady's Davidsonian argument, see: Adler (2007, 2002, 1994); Elgin (2002); Fricker (1995); Graham (2000); and Van Cleve (2006).

32 Adler is citing Edna Ullmann-Margalit's (1983) analysis of presumption.

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33 Jack herself, like Burge, argues that comprehension itself does furnish us with reason to believe. For some related discussion of the connection between language use and truth and its bearing upon the reductionism-antireductionism dispute, see Rysiew (2000).

34 Fricker's use of this term – as at (2006b, 20) – is incautious, as she explicitly distances her central thesis from the claim that we literally perceive the content and force of heard utterances (2003, 329). But what follows does not require that Fricker make this stronger claim.

35 Fricker herself (*ibid.*; 1994, 146; 1995, 399) thinks that such failings are quite common. But as indicated above (n. 30), this is not obvious, although the *appearance* that lying and honest error are prevalent is something we should probably expect.

36 Of course, Fricker's positive view is not so easily summarized. For instance, she allows that sincerity may be assumed as the default setting, and so too competence with regard to a fairly narrow range of tellings. Whether the requirement that speakers must otherwise have positive reasons for the speaker's competence is plausible, just how that requirement is best construed, and whether the resulting view constitutes a genuine alternative to the non-reductionist or anti-inferentialist view, are all important questions. For some critical discussion, see Adler (2007), Graham (2006), Insole (2000), and Weiner (2003).

37 Fricker regards "the multi-stage causal chain through the teller's mind, and consequent contingency of the link between any state of affairs and her report of its obtaining" as a, and perhaps the, "key feature of testimony" (2006b, 20).

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