

Comments on Alan Millar

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There is so much in Alan's paper that I can only pick one topic, the non-inferential nature of testimony, and add a few short questions on other topics at the end.

I. Inferentialism vs. the Direct Account

1. *Inferentialism* Alan argues that a certain inferentialist view of testimony over-intellectualizes testimony. The view is that testimonial knowledge is based on an inference from premises known (whether by testimony or otherwise). As to the form of the inference Alan refers to Fumerton (and many others):

- (1) S asserts that p in conditions C
- (2) Whoever asserts that p in conditions C, says something true
- (3) Hence, "p" is true (1,2)

This is not quite the conclusion we need and want, namely

- (4) p.

But (4) easily follows from (3) plus some disquotational principle for truth which is simple enough for normal speakers to know at least implicitly. Another modification is necessary because (2) is a bit too strong and should realistically be replaced by

- (2*) Most people who assert that p in conditions C, say something true

This turns our inference from a deductive one into an inductive one – which is fine:

- (1) S asserts that p in conditions C
- (2*) Most people who assert that p in conditions C, say something true
- (3) Hence, “p” is true (1,2*)
- (D) If “p” is true, then p
- (4) p (3, D)

This explains the possibility of testimonial knowledge because normal subjects can make this inference. Given that they know the empirical premises (1) and (2*) plus the armchair triviality (D), they can gain knowledge of the conclusion by competently inferring it from the known premises (note that we are using some principle of closure of knowledge under known entailment here). Let us call this view “inferentialism”. This is a reductionist account only if the source of the knowledge of the premises are supposed to be “testimony-free”.

2. *What’s the Problem with Inferentialism?* Alan agrees with Fumerton that this account is not plausible because it expects too much from ordinary subjects. If we don’t want to be sceptics about testimonial knowledge we need to offer a less demanding account. But why exactly should one think that the account above is too demanding? The inference is certainly very basic and if we cannot expect ordinary subjects to make it, then we should be sceptics about inferences and inferential knowledge in general. Which we aren’t. We think that ordinary subjects can easily make inferences like that, without the least help from their friends.

Hence, what remains is the objection that the premises are too difficult to know. But is that so? (1) is certainly not too difficult to know and we should also not be reluctant to attribute knowledge of armchair trivialities to people. The only remaining potential trouble maker is thus

- (2*) Most people who assert that p in conditions C, say something true

But why should we not be able to know general truths like this one?

Perhaps the crux is that ordinary subjects can know the premises of the inference but not in a testimony-free way? This problem would be relevant to

reductionists about testimony only, if at all. Though Alan does not commit himself clearly to reductionism, one can sense certain reductionist tendencies. Now, what about the problem of knowing the premises of the inference without relying on testimony? Can I not clearly know at least (1) or (D) without relying on others? If yes, this would leave us with (2*), again. The core of the charge of over-intellectualization would then be that we would have to do much more inquiry and thinking than we can in order to know in a testimony-free way that most people are trustworthy in conditions C.

One problem I see here is that Alan makes a couple of remarks (cf. sec.5) which seem to suggest that we can know instantiations of (2*):

Most kids are trustworthy when they answer simple questions by their parents, given certain straightforward conditions

Or even the still general

Most of the time my son is trustworthy when I ask him a simple question concerning the whereabouts of my books.

If that is true, then it is not clear to me what the problem of inferentialism is according to Alan.

3. *Particularism?* Or am I misinterpreting Alan here and he really wants to deny the possibility of testimony-free knowledge of such simple generalities? I can think of three reasons for denying this. One could be an anti-reductionist about testimony and agree with Coady and many others that we do know instantiations of (2*) but not in a testimony-free way. I myself find this option very plausible but Alan strikes me as too much of a reductionist to go for that. The second option would be the sceptical one: Testimonial knowledge requires more than we can do. Again, I don't see Alan as embracing this option.

Finally, one could think of some form of "epistemic particularism" according to which we can know and only need to know particular truths about single cases, like "My son is trustworthy on this particular occasion". Alan does indeed make a couple of

remarks to this effect (cf. esp. sec.6). He speaks of the “unspecifiability of the features of the person telling, and of the telling, and the context of telling, that make the telling an indicator of the truth of what is told” and of the “consequent unavailability of generalisations adequate to explaining how we know that the telling is truthful”.

If I understand this correctly, Alan is arguing that we cannot but also need not use generalisations like our second premise (2*) in order to be able to come to know things via testimony. Alan can tell whether his son is telling the truth on this particular occasion without relying on general knowledge concerning the behaviour of kids or of his son in certain kinds of situations.

This is epistemic particularism proper. It reminds us of moral particularism, classic and ancient, after which it might be modelled. I find it extremely interesting but also not easy to believe. I might have missed something but I don't see from Alan's paper – or from anything else - how this should be possible. Rather, when Alan analyzes particular examples of testimonies, he seems to attribute general knowledge to the subject of the form of (2*).

Consider an example. I ask Alan in which direction Bridge of Allen is and he tells me it is straight ahead. Can I really tell, just from the specifics of this unique situation that Alan is telling the truth? According to Alan, I can tell it on the basis of certain features. But how can I know of the relation between some features and the truth? I feel very much like the arch-reductionist about testimony here, David Hume: What we need in order to establish such a connection is some statistical regularity, that is, some generalisation.

Or does Alan's testimony wear its trustworthiness on its sleeves? Perhaps the following passage in Alan's paper can be understood in this way: “the telling can indicate that it is truthful in the sense that it would not be the telling that it is – a telling that has the various features that it has - were it not that it is truthful” (sec.1, a). For that, it would have to wear at least two things on its sleeves: its sincerity and its truth. There are problems with both. The very possibility of successful insincerity presupposes that the piece of behaviour to be judged as sincere or insincere does not wear its degree of sincerity on its sleeves. More problematic even is the idea that an utterance or more generally, some piece of information could also inform us about its truth value. Sure, someone can say “It is raining – and that's true” but the utterance

itself cannot wear its truth value on its sleeves. It could still be false to say “It is raining – and that’s true”.

I mention this idea just to get it out of the way. I do not think that that is what Alan has in mind. Perhaps he is rather thinking along the lines of a certain view of perceptual recognition? Face recognition would be a useful example. How can Alan tell that he is looking at his son? Let us say that there is a non-inferential, “direct” recognitional response: He looks at him and simply recognizes him. No use of generalizations involved. However, if that is the case and if testimony is just like that, that is, if the hearer of a testimony simply reacts directly to the trustworthiness of a piece of testimony without using generalisations or making inferences, then it is not clear why the hearer should still need positive reasons to believe the testimony – which he needs according to Alan’s view. The idea of direct recognition does not seem to go very well together with Alan’s view about the role of positive reasons (the inclusion of the latter perhaps being a sign of a form of reductionism).

4. *Positive Reasons and Inferences?* But perhaps Alan does not want to commit to this kind of particularism. But then the question is: What is his alternative to inferentialism? How does the direct account work, given that reasons play a core role for the hearer? Alan thinks that the transfer of knowledge via the act of telling (or via testimony more generally) requires that the hearer recognizes and knows that the speaker is telling him something and also that he is trustworthy (sec.1-2). According to Alan, “we need positive reasons to trust informants if we are to gain knowledge straightforwardly from their testimony”. How does this differ from inferentialism if we exclude particularism? It seems that the reasons a subject would need are of the form of (1) and (2*) (and (D)) in the inference above. And it also seems that the subject would have to “use” those reasons in an inference in order to be able to gain testimonial knowledge. But if that is true, then Alan’s alternative would simply collapse into inferentialism (perhaps even of a reductionist sort). But that cannot be welcome to Alan.

Here is the basic dilemma: either one goes for a direct account of testimony but then it is not clear what the role of positive reasons could be; or one sticks with these positive reasons but then it is not clear how one can avoid collapse into inferentialism.

5. *Perception and Testimony* One of the most intriguing ideas in Alan's paper is to look at the analogies (and disanalogies, I guess) between perception and testimony. I would expect that the assumption of a close analogy between the two would rather support a default account (which Alan rejects) than a reason-based account (which he defends). Here is why. It seems plausible to assume that we can acquire perceptual knowledge in the absence of knowledge or even any reason to believe that our senses are trustworthy (either in general or in particular cases). Sure, we can't if we believe we don't have a reason to trust our senses but that is not what is at issue here, namely the simple lack of a belief that we can trust them. If we needed a positive reason to trust our senses, then very few of us, if any, could have perceptual knowledge of even the simplest form. If all that is correct, then the question arises why we should be so much more internalist and demanding about testimony? Why shouldn't testimony work like perception, in a default-reason kind of way? If it doesn't, then what explains the asymmetry between perception and testimony with respect to the requirement of positive reasons?

6. *Defaults* The alternative is thus a default account of testimony. According to one version, the hearer is – if the conditions are right - entitled to trust the speaker but need not know or even believe that the speaker is trustworthy. There are, to borrow a phrase from Dretske, epistemic entitlements without epistemic obligations. Given this view, the hearer can be much more passive than according to Alan's view. The focus is not so much on the abilities of the hearer but rather on the abilities of the speaker. And the role of trust is much more central here: We cannot make sense of the transfer of information if we don't refer to factors different from knowledge, like trust. I don't quite see why this should lead to "carelessness and gullibility" (cf. sec.1, p2). Let's call this view "trusting anti-reductionism". What (in a nutshell) is wrong with trusting anti-reductionism?

II. Three more Questions

7. *Lingustic, non-linguistic and non-intentional* Alan holds that telling is a distinctive communicative act (sec.1, p4). This is probably right. The question is, though, whether

this act is the relevant one or the only relevant one for testimony. Is all testimony based on acts of telling? There are linguistic acts which lack the communicative intention of the act of telling but which function as transmitters of knowledge. Jack says to Jill “I hope Ben won’t forget to bring some wine tonight”. Jill might come to know many things through this utterance, for instance that Ben is around even though Jack did not tell Jill that Ben is around. This was rather presupposed in his utterance. Another case is non-linguistic transfer of knowledge. Bo has lost her voice but is trying to let me know that it is raining outside. She catches my eye and waives with the umbrella. I thus come to know that it is raining outside. These two cases – non-linguistic communication with the intention to let the other person know that p and linguistic communication without the intention to let the other person know that p – suggest that transfer of knowledge is not necessarily based on acts of telling.

I take it that Alan agrees with this and holds that there is a variety of ways in which testimony can work. Why then so much focus on the act of telling? And given the variety of testimonial mechanisms, should we expect one unitary account which covers all the cases?

8. *Rules* There is a lot of very interesting thoughts on practices and rules in Alan’s paper (cf. sec.3-4) which I have not touched upon at all. I don’t want to go into it here. However, one rather specific question I would like to raise quickly: How does the difference between constitutive rules and regulative rules come into the picture here? What would count as a violation of the one and what as one of the other?

9. *Moral Expertise* Finally, a big and broad question: How do you feel about moral expertise? Here is what I have in mind. If one accepts the possibility of moral knowledge – and many of us do these days -, then it seems plausible to also allow for moral testimony. But that conclusion seems very problematic.

Consider an example. Suppose Jack wonders whether cloning is morally problematic. He knows very little about cloning and hasn’t thought about its moral aspects before. Suppose further cloning isn’t morally problematic and that some people (who know the facts and have thought about the issue a lot) know that cloning is morally acceptable. Jack asks Jill whom he correctly recognizes as an authority on

cloning and on moral questions concerning it. Jill tells him that cloning is not morally problematic. Jack is relieved and says to himself “Great, now I know that cloning is fine and I don’t have to think about it any more!”. This seems unacceptable.

If we don’t accept the possibility of moral testimony, then how can we stick with the idea that there is moral knowledge? If, however, we accept the possibility of moral testimony, then the question arises why that is so counter-intuitive? Is it that moral experts are harder to identify than experts on non-moral topics? But why should that be the case? One could, alternatively, propose that the idea of moral agency is very important and that it entails that agents think about moral issues on their own and don’t just rely on hearsay. But why is hearsay unacceptable when it comes to moral agency but clearly acceptable when it comes to non-moral action? I want to go to Bridge of Allen, you tell me it’s straight ahead, I take your word for it and go there. No problem with that. So why should there be a problem with relying on moral hearsay?

At least at first sight it looks like we’re facing a dilemma here: The possibility of moral knowledge seems to bring with it the possibility of moral testimony. However, the first is very plausible while the second is very implausible. And we don’t know which idea to give up and why.