

Comments on Sanford Goldberg's 'If that were true I would have heard about it by now'

Jesper Kallestrup. University of Edinburgh (jesper.kallestrup@ed.ac.uk)

Most epistemologists have been concerned with the transition from the speaker's testimony that *p* to the hearer's subsequent formation of justified belief that *p*. This testimony-to-truth transition is manifested by:

(2) If *S* testified that *p*, then *p*

And here's a rationalisation of the epistemic ground of testimonial belief. *S* testified that *p*. If *S* testified that *p*, then *H* justifiably believes that *p*—provided (i) *S* justifiably believes that *p*, (ii) *H* forms the belief that *p* on the basis of the content of *S*'s testimony, and (iii) *H* has no undefeated defeaters. Conditions (i) – (iii) are met. So, *H* justifiably believes that *p*. But Goldberg is interested in the transition from the lack of some source's testimony that *p* to the subject's subsequent formation of justified belief that not-*p*. This truth-to-testimony transition is manifested by the converse:

(5) If *p*, then one among the trusted sources testified that *p*

And here's a rationalisation of the epistemic ground of pure coverage-supported belief. None of the trusted sources testified that *p*. If none among the trusted sources testified that *p*, then *H* justifiably believes that not-*p*—provided *H* has justification to believe that (i) *S* regularly reports about *p*-type matters (source-existence condition), (ii) *S* reliably uncovers and subsequently publicises *p*-type matters (reliable-coverage condition), (iii) *S* had the means and time to make these discoveries and reports (sufficient time condition), (iv) *H* would have come across such a report had one been made (reception-condition), and (v) *H* didn't encounter such a report (silence condition). *H* has justification to believe that conditions (i) – (v) are met. So, *H* justifiably believes that not-*p*.

Coverage-supported beliefs are ubiquitous. Goldberg cites three cases: if justified, they can offer further support for an already justified belief, they can support the formation of new beliefs, or they can provide reason to disbelieve some piece of testimony opposing an existing belief. There're other cases where coverage-supported beliefs provide reason to believe some piece of testimony supporting (opposing) an existing belief. E.g. out of the blue you have formed the belief that Buckingham Palace hasn't (has) been flooded as a consequence of the recent heavy downfall in the UK. Your reliable friend tells you that Buckingham Palace is bone dry. Regularly watching the BBC and Channel 4 news, you correctly infer that it hasn't been flooded since none of these trusted sources so testified.

I've no major objections to Goldberg's really interesting paper—only the following five observations, or suggestions for improvement.

I: Additional Condition. As a result of your firm belief in divine ordination of the Queen, you dogmatically believe that, come what may, Buckingham Palace would never succumb to flooding. Now suppose your misinformed friend tells you that Buckingham Palace has just

been flooded. You run through coverage-type reasoning: if that were true I would have heard about it by now, but I haven't, so it's false. The way in which you dogmatically hold this—true—belief renders you incapable of being epistemically responsive to the deliverances of your reliable sources, and so your belief isn't evidentially sensitive in the way it should be if justifiable by this type of reasoning. If instead your friend had been right about the flooding, and you had reliably heard about it, you would still not have believed it. You fail to place epistemic trust in your sources. We should supplement (i) – (v) with a 6th condition—call it:

(belief-formation condition), roughly that had H come across such a report that p, H would have formed the belief that p on the basis of the content of that report

Putting (reliable-coverage condition) and (belief-formation condition) together, it follows that had H come across a report that p, H would have formed the justified belief that p— provided S's reliability suffices for S to justifiably believe that p, and H has no undefeated defeaters.

II: Transition without Transmission. In most cases (2) embodies the intentional transmission of an epistemic property from S to H. Setting cases of unreliable-believers-yet-reliable-testifiers aside, H acquires justified belief that p upon hearing S's testimony that p only if S justifiably believes that p. S's telling prompts the transmission of justified belief from S to H. Moreover, S's telling is typically occasioned by the intention to impart information to H. But it looks as if the transition in (5) is no transmission of an epistemic property—at least not intentionally so. When H comes to justifiably believe that not-p as a result of not having witnessed testimony that p, there's no guarantee that H's source has formed the belief that not-p. And even if it has, it's unlikely that it intended to impart the belief that not-p by not testifying that p. The most reliable way even for an attuned coverage-reliable source to convey the information that not-p to H is to testify that not-p in the presence of H.

When you justifiably come to believe that Buckingham Palace hasn't been flooded, nobody at the BBC or Channel 4 need have any such belief. And even if they did, and intended it communicated to their attuned viewers, they would in all likelihood have chosen to do so by broadcasting a news report on the absence of flooding at the Palace. The reason our trusted sources don't rely on coverage is that the underlying reasoning is an unreliable way for them to get their intended messages across to us.

III. Inferential Justification. Non-reductionists accept that in the absence of undefeated defeaters, H can justifiably come to believe that p merely on the basis of S's say-so. The justification that H's belief accrues upon S's telling that p can't be reduced to independent non-testimonial justification about S's reliability. But in the case of coverage-supported beliefs, it looks like their justification can't be purely non-inferential as they rely for their justification on prior justification to believe conditions (i) – (v)—and (vi). This is an epistemic point about dependency between distinct types of justification—be they internalist or externalist. But there's a corresponding point about the formation of beliefs: relying on a source for the formation of coverage-supported beliefs is aetiologically derivative from relying on a source for the formation of testimonial beliefs. The explanation is presumably that it would be epistemically irresponsible to invest trust in a source for coverage, if one had no prior justification to believe in the testimonial reliability of that source.

This doesn't mean, however, that reductionism about coverage-justification is true by default. The interplay between some of these conditions assumes the reliability of testimony itself, and so there's no hope of reducing justification associated with coverage-supported beliefs to perceptual, memorial or inductive justification unless testimonial justification is subject to such reduction. The key point is that allowing for coverage-justification to be dependent on non-testimonial justification doesn't concede the stronger reductionist claim that coverage-justification reduces to non-testimonial justification straight away.

IV: Mode of the Conditional. Goldberg takes the following stripped-down inference to be a rationalisation of a pure case of a coverage-supported belief:

- (4) None among the trusted sources testified that p
- (5) If p, then one among the trusted sources testified that p
- (6) So, not-p

Coverage-type reasoning involves the subjunctive conditional, so why is (5) a material conditional? Coverage seems to require a modal tie between p and one of the sources reporting that p, but as stated (5) follows from the negation of p. (5) merely captures the transition from the absence of testimony that p to not-p—a transition warranted by coverage. So, if (4) – (6) is to amount to an adequate rationalisation of such beliefs, and we retain the conditional in (5) in the material mode, we should modify (4):

- (4*) None among the trustworthy sources testified that p

Trustworthiness is a modal notion: some piece of testimony wouldn't be offered if it were not true. Additionally, we would avoid cases where S engages in coverage-type reasoning that lead her astray, because she trusts an untrustworthy, hence unreliable, source.

V: Assymmetry and Newsworthiness.

You wonder whether House of Parliament has been flooded as a consequence of the recent heavy downfall in the UK. Regularly watching the BBC and Channel 4 news, you infer that it has since none of these trusted sources testified that it hasn't. Your reasoning is flawed. The following material conditional is in most cases false:

- (5*) If not-p, then one among the trusted sources testified that not-p

But contrast (5) and (5*) with (2) and (2*):

- (2*) If S testified that not-p, then not-p

Clearly, (2) and (2*) stand or fall together: if one is true, so is the other. But (5) and (5*) are rarely simultaneously true. Why this assymmetry between testimony and coverage? The answer is clear once we turn to the exceptions where instances of both (5) and (5*) are true. In the immediate aftermath of the initial bombing of al-Qaeda cells in Afghanistan, it was as likely as not that Osama bin Laden was still alive. And the public was desperate to know which was true. In circumstances where the trusted sources were attuned to this informational demand, if Osama bin Laden was still alive, one among those sources testified that he was, and if it was not the case that Osama bin Laden was still alive, one among them testified that he was not. It follows that either one of those sources testified that he was still alive, or one of those sources testified that he was no longer alive.

Coverage is thus tied up with newsworthiness. In the normal run of things, it has no news-value to be told what didn't happen, or hasn't happened. E.g. it's not true that had the Parliament not been flooded, one among the trusted sources would have so reported. Coverage-type principles should reflect this asymmetry in newsworthiness. Thus (i) in Goldberg's (AC) is typically false as stated: members of the audience would rarely be interested in the truth-value of p as such, but would only be interested in p if true. So, the contents of most instances of coverage-supported beliefs will be fairly negative or uninformative in pertaining to status quo. Recall Goldberg's first two cases: no WMDs have been found in Iraq, the President did not announce a new major foreign policy last week, etc. But this doesn't mean the information is without epistemic value: it can be employed to settle questions, reject pieces of testimony, or confirm existing beliefs.