ASSURANCE AND DISJUNCTIVISM

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

University of California, Irvine & University of Edinburgh

1. EVIDENTIALISM AND ASSURANCE

In The Exchange of Words: Speech, Testimony, and Intersubjectivity, Richard Moran (2018) has produced a rich, original, and through-provoking work.\(^1\) Given the book’s evident merits, it seems almost churlish to focus on criticisms, but simply enumerating points of praise does not make good copy. So let me jump right in and declare from the off that there is, it seems to me at any rate, a very odd theoretical lacuna in this otherwise meticulously argued piece of work. The lacuna relates to the positive account of epistemology of testimony that Moran is offering. While it’s very clear what he’s against in this regard, it isn’t at all transparent what he is in favour of, exactly. And yet a major selling point of the research programme that Moran is articulating is meant to be that it offers a reconfiguration of traditional conceptions of the epistemology of testimony, which is why Moran’s lack of candour in this regard is so puzzling.\(^2\)

Moran’s critical target is straightforward. This is the kind of ‘evidentialist’ account of the epistemology of testimony whereby we should treat the testimony in question as an ordinary piece of evidence from which we can, in the right conditions, appropriately draw inferences from. As Moran (p. x) nicely puts it, on this conception of epistemology of testimony we “learn something from a speaker’s utterance in the same way we learn something from her blushing.” Moran says that on this model, it is not the case that one believes the speaker when one comes to a conclusion based on what she says, much less that one believes her because the speaker presented this claim to one. In
contrast, Moran wants to urge an opposing approach—the assurance model of the epistemology of testimony (e.g., p. 68)—where the epistemology is “irreducibly social and intersubjective” (p. xi). In particular, rather than drawing inferences from the evidence provided by the utterance, we should instead take seriously the idea that “the speaker addresses her audience directly and explicitly presents her act as having a particular epistemic significance, that of being a reason to believe the content of what she asserts.” (p. xi) In short, “[O]ne person tells the other person something, and this other person believes her?, such that the “direct object” of the target “relation of believing [...] is not a proposition but a person.” (p. 38, italics in original)

We should note at this point that Moran seems to regard both reductionist and non-reductionist accounts of the epistemology of testimony as being part of the evidential camp (although he never explicitly uses this terminology).³ This is significant, as I think the gloss just given might naturally give the impression that it is just reductionism that Moran has in his sights in this regard. Very roughly, while reductionists demand that the subject has an independent evidential basis for legitimately accepting testimony, anti-reductionists hold that one instead needs to lack reasons for doubting this testimony. According to Moran, however, both proposals are characteristically inclined to take an evidentialist view of the epistemology of testimony, it is just that the anti-reductionist allows there to be non-empirical grounds for treating testimony as having a general defeasible justification (in contrast to reductionism, which treats the epistemic question as an entirely empirical one).

The assurance account of the epistemology of testimony is an intriguing proposal, but it also prompts many questions, not all of which get answered in Moran’s book. Let’s start with what is meant to be wrong with the evidentialist model that is being rejected. Moran’s presentation of this view makes it seem as if the speaker is largely a redundant element in this proposal’s epistemology of testimony.⁴ And yet it’s obviously the case that the speaker plays a crucial role in any evidential assessment of this kind. Is the speaker known to be reliable about these matters? Is the speaker making her assertion with confidence, or is there reason to doubt her confidence in the truth of what she asserts? And so on. All these factors would have an evidential bearing on whether one reasonably accepts what is asserted on the basis of the evidence. Accordingly, what’s to prevent the evidentialist from arguing that there is a perfectly respectable sense in which their view can allow that the primary focus in the testimonial exchange should be on believing the testifier rather than just treating what she says as another piece of evidence to be evaluated? In good epistemic conditions, after all, where one has no particular reason to doubt the asserter and every good reason
to trust her, then one should just accept what she says at face-value. But that’s not to reject the idea that the relation in play here is ultimately an evidential one. For example, with the point put in terms amenable to reductionism, one could argue that one is right to trust the informant in such cases precisely because one has a sound evidential basis, and hence good reason, for doing so.

Moran’s idea seems to be that the evidential model ignores the special normative force of the intersubjective relationship that is forged by the one making the assertion and the audience to whom the assertion is addressed. But what exactly is the epistemological significance of this intersubjective relationship? After all, Moran is surely not going to dispute that there will inevitably be cases where this relationship holds but the recipient of the testimony would not be justified in believing what she is told, such as when the person making the assertion is known to be unreliable. Moreover, in such a case the recipient of the testimony should presumably not believe what they are told on this basis alone, and should rather weigh-up the overall evidence they have for this claim (where this evidence includes such considerations as the reliability of the asserter, the plausibility of what is asserted, and so on). Doesn’t that mean that in epistemically sub-optimal cases of testimony the epistemic relation in play is an evidential one even on the assurance view of testimony? Moran seems to suggest as much himself by the way he qualifies his thesis. He remarks, for example, that his “hope is to show that the paradigmatic situations of telling cannot be thought of as the presentation or acceptance of evidence at all.” (p. 38) If we plausibly construe what is paradigmatic about these situations epistemically, then this seems to suggest that Moran would not object to thinking of the non-paradigmatic situations as being amenable to an evidentialist construal.

Furthermore, even when one is dealing with epistemically paradigmatic cases of testimony, the assurance view holds that one’s reason for believing the testified proposition comes from believing the subject, which also strongly suggests that one thereby has evidence for this belief also. For sure, Moran doesn’t put this point in terms of evidence, specifically, but it’s hard to understand epistemic reasons in any way that is completely disconnected from evidence. In particular, if one has (epistemic) reason to believe the assertion because one has (epistemic) reason to believe the asserter, then doesn’t one also have evidence for thinking that the target proposition is true? Put another way, if the subject doesn’t have evidence for thinking that it is true, then in what sense does she have an epistemic reason for believing it to be true?

My point is that when we start to drill down on this contrast between evidentialist and assurance accounts of the epistemology of testimony, the distinction in play starts to look much less sharp than when first presented. In particular, the evidentialist can perfectly well account for the
special weight that trusting the speaker plays in a normal testimonial exchange without departing from the essentials of their view. Moreover, the assurance view also seems to trade in the epistemic currency of evidence, at least to some degree. In the epistemically non-paradigm cases, the testimonial relationship seems evidential in much the same way as the evidentialist would understand that relationship. And even in the epistemically paradigm cases, it seems the assurance view is committed to some kind of evidential claim, despite the rhetoric to the contrary.

This last point is especially pressing for the assurance view, because it isn’t at all clear just what is justifying the target belief in epistemically paradigmatic testimonial exchanges. The claim is that in such cases in believing the asserter one thereby gains an adequate rational basis for believing the claim asserted. That looks plausible. If conditions are epistemically paradigmatic, then presumably there is no particular reason to doubt what the subject says; indeed, there will be no significant counterevidence or defeaters of any kind (including normative defeaters of which the subject happens to be unaware). But we are still owed an explanation of what is doing the justifying of the testimonial belief. The reductionist and anti-reductionists at least have stories to tell on this score. For the former, the idea is that one needs to have some evidential basis for thinking that one is in these good epistemic conditions. For the latter, since they hold that there is a general a priori presumption in favour of the truth of testimony, they hold that the mere absence of reasons to doubt suffices to make the belief justified.

What does the assurance view hold? I must confess that after reading the book I am none the wiser. Sure, we are told that in believing the asserter one gains a reason for the belief in the target proposition. But as noted above, that reason is only available in epistemically paradigmatic conditions. So does the subject need independent reasons for thinking that she is in such conditions in order for the reason to transfer? Presumably not, as that would be reductionism, which has been rejected (qua evidentialism). Or, if not, then is the idea that there is some general defeasible justification for testimonial beliefs, such that one is entitled to accept them where there is no evidence for the contrary? Again, presumably not, as that would be anti-reductionism, which has also been rejected (again, qua evidentialism). So what is the epistemological story that the assurance view offers, exactly? Why does trusting the informant in the right conditions lead to one gaining an adequate rational basis for belief in the target proposition? Without a concrete answer to this question, it isn’t at all clear exactly what Moran’s assurance model is meant to deliver in terms of the epistemology of testimony, and that’s a very serious theoretical lacuna.
2. TESTIMONIAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM

Despite these critical comments, I think there is a way of understanding what is going on in the assurance view which removes the apparent lacuna in the epistemological story that it tells. I’m not sure whether this way of thinking about the view is what proponents have in mind—indeed, I imagine it isn’t, or else Moran would simply state his view this way. I’m also not sure whether this rendering of the view is plausible; my claim is only that it seems to be a charitable way of understanding what is going on (the alternative would be to leave the lacuna in play, glaring as it is).

My thought is that the assurance view seems naturally allied to some form of epistemological disjunctivism as regards testimonial knowledge. This sort of position will be familiar to many epistemologists as regards a core variety of perceptual knowledge, but not its application to testimony. Very roughly, the idea would be that in epistemically paradigm cases of testimony, one is in possession of a factive reason for believing the target proposition, of the form that one heard that this was the case from a particular testifier. The reason is factive, in the sense that it is a reason that entails the truth of the target proposition (just as, in the perceptual case, the factive reason that one sees that entails the truth of ). Here is John McDowell, who may be the only person to explicitly advocate for such an epistemological disjunctivist position about testimony, on this point:

The epistemic standing one can acquire in conversation is that of having heard from one’s interlocutor that things are thus and so. One cannot count as having heard from someone that things are thus and so unless, by virtue of understanding what the person says, one is in a position to know that things are that way. If it turns out that things are not that way, or that although they are, the person from whom one took oneself to have heard it did not know it, one cannot persist in the claim that one heard from him that things are that way, but must retreat to the claim that one heard him say that they are. (McDowell 1994, p. 210)

Note the significance of the factive reason. This ensures that there is no inferential gap that one needs to surmount in order to have knowledge of the target proposition, as there would be if one’s reason was non-factive in the usual way (e.g., just of the form that one heard one’s informant say that , which doesn’t entail that ). This is why a belief formed on the basis of this factive reason will amount to knowledge. In short, the epistemically paradigmatic nature of the testimonial situation ensures that the testifier’s knowledge of what she asserts transfers directly to one via the factive reason for belief that it makes available.

Of course, even a testimonial epistemological disjunctivist will not deny that there are cases where one thinks that one is in possession of such a factive reason but where the target proposition
is false. More generally, there will be cases where one cannot come to have knowledge merely by forming one’s belief on this (apparent) rational basis. Call all such cases bad cases. Bad cases are opposed to good cases, where conditions are epistemically paradigmatic (so the speaker is reliable and sincere, there are no defeaters in play, and so on). Nonetheless, the testimonial epistemological disjunctivist will maintain that the mere fact that one cannot always distinguish good cases from bad cases does not suffice to show that one lacks the factive rational support in the good case (it merely shows that it is lacking in the bad case, sometimes faultlessly so).

Moreover, the testimonial epistemological disjunctivist will contend that the good case is the default case, unless we are given grounds for thinking otherwise. This is a key move that they make. In particular, the line of argument is that we are led into thinking that the default case should not be understood in this way via a faulty line of reasoning. Roughly, from the fact that undetectable error is possible in the testimonial case it is inferred that all we ever have to go on, even when epistemic conditions are otherwise optimal, are mere non-factive reasons from which we need to assemble an inferential case for testimonial knowledge. Not so, says the testimonial epistemological disjunctivist. For while this is our fate in the bad case, that’s entirely compatible with one having possession of factive reasons that suffice for testimonial knowledge in the good case.

Notice that this is not a form of anti-reductionism as regards the epistemology of testimony, at least as that latter view is normally understood anyway. The claim is not that there is any general, but defeasible, a priori presumption in favour of the truth of testimony. One could supplement the testimonial epistemological disjunctivist story with such a claim, of course, but the addition would largely be superfluous. If the good case does indeed supply us with factive testimonial reasons, sufficient for testimonial knowledge, then what would it add to also be told that there is also a general defeasible a priori basis for belief in testimony?

Indeed, testimonial epistemological disjunctivism has in some respects more in common with reductionism than anti-reductionism, at least as far as someone like McDowell understands the disjunctivist proposal. This is because he is quite clear that such factive reasons are reflectively accessible to the subject. In the good case, then, the subject has an excellent rational basis reflectively available in support of her belief; indeed, the best kind of rational basis, as it is factive. (And note too that the anti-reductionist doesn’t hold that the subject should be reflectively aware of the general a priori basis for testimonial belief, so this is another point of difference between testimonial epistemological disjunctivism and anti-reductionism).
Of course, this is very different from normal forms of reductionism, not least because the subject precisely doesn’t have an independent rational basis for her belief in the target proposition. But then this was required by the reductionist precisely because of the alleged infirmity of the non-independent rational basis that the testimony was supposed to offer, even in the good case. When one moves to a view on which factive rational support is available in the good case, then it’s not clear why an independence condition would be demanded on testimonial belief.

Another difference between standard forms of reductionism and testimonial epistemological disjunctivism—one that should be amenable to someone like Moran who defends an assurance view—is that the latter clearly doesn’t hold that testimony is necessarily to be understood as mere evidence from which one is to make an appropriate assertion. Instead, in keeping with the assurance view, the normal case will be such that one’s relationship to the testimony is not an evidential one at all, at least in the sense that one is obliged to make an inference based on evidence that is merely suggestive of the truth of the target proposition. Crucially, however, where testimonial epistemological disjunctivism diverges from the assurance view is precisely in providing an epistemological story about why such a non-evidential epistemic grounding might be available in the good case, in virtue of the possession of the factive testimonial reason.

Should we understand Moran’s assurance view along epistemological disjunctivist lines? As noted above, I think such a construal would be entirely in keeping with the spirit of what Moran proposes, while at the same time offering a concrete answer to the core challenge facing the epistemology of testimony. In particular, it is a proposal that is distinct from traditional evidentialist views of the reductionist/anti-reductionist type that Moran rejects. In contrast, if he doesn’t want to go down this route, then at least it would be useful to know why, and in particular to understand what response his assurance model offers to this core epistemological challenge.
REFERENCES


NOTES

1 All page/section references are to this work.

2 No doubt Moran believes that he has been forthcoming on this score. My guess is that the ambitious nature of this work, which speaks to topics in so many areas of philosophy (action theory, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language), means that it is easy to overlook the concerns of a particular sub-set of one's audience.

3 See especially §2.2, which is the closest Moran gets to discussing the reductionism/anti-reductionism distinction (though even then not in these particular terms).

4 In fact, as Stephen Wright has pointed out to me, Moran’s view seems to be even stronger in this respect, such that on the evidentialist picture the fact that the evidence is spoken actually mitigates against the positive epistemic status of the testimony-based belief at issue. Here is Moran (p. 42):

   “If the epistemic import of what people say is at bottom that of an indication of what they believe, it would seem perverse for us to give any privileged status to the vehicle of knowledge (speech and assertion) where we are most vulnerable, because most dependent on the free disposal of the other person.”

5 I advance epistemological disjunctivism of this form in Pritchard (2012), drawing on earlier work by McDowell (e.g., 1995). See also Pritchard (2015). McDowell (1994) himself seems to endorse a parallel view about the epistemology of testimony, but there is little take-up of this position that I’m aware of. See also Wright (2019) for a recent critical discussion of the idea that epistemological disjunctivism could be applied to the testimonial realm.

6 I’m actually sceptical that this is the right factive reason to opt for in this regard, but I will use it for these purposes as it’s the one that McDowell (1994) offers. Nothing really turns on this issue, for all that matters is that there is a testimonial factive reason.

7 Indeed, McDowell is—unusually, for him—explicit that no such epistemic presumption exists. See McDowell (1994, p. 298, n11). (Thanks to Stephen Wright for reminding me about this).

8 Relatedly, the general defeasible a priori epistemic basis for testimonial belief at issue in anti-reductionist views is also available even in testimonial bad cases, which is another point of contrast with the factive reasons proposed by testimonial epistemological disjunctivism (which only apply in the good case).

9 I am grateful to Stephen Wright for very helpful comments and discussion on an earlier draft.