

3. THE TEACHER AS AN EXPERT: ANALYSIS OF JENNIFER LACKEY'S NOTION OF TESTIMONY

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Abstract

This paper appraises Jennifer Lackey's Notion of Testimony as it applies to teachers being regarded as experts. Testimony has over the years proven to be a vital source of knowledge, this is because everything we have come to know as humans, about ourselves, the people around us, our world, we know through the testimony of others. Despite how vital testimony has proven to be, it has not enjoyed the same level of epistemic exposure as the other sources of knowledge. The objective of this paper therefore is to examine if teachers can be truly called experts according to Jennifer Lackey's notion of testimony? This paper employs the philosophical methods of analysis, criticism and prescription and it concludes that teachers are experts but should strive not to be experts-as-authority but experts-as-advisors.

Keywords: Teacher, Testimony, Experts-as-authority, Experts-as-advisors, Jennifer Lackey

Introduction

The question of how we acquire knowledge is of great importance to epistemologist and in fact philosophers in general, and to answer this question we have two groups of thought: empiricism and rationalism. The empiricist belief that all our knowledge comes from our senses - what we can see, touch, taste, smell and hear; for them the mind at birth is a tabula rasa (clean slate) and all that we know are gotten from our sense experience. Notable proponents of this school of thought are: John Locke, George Berkley and David Hume. On the other hand, we have the rationalist group who belief that rather than the senses, we derive knowledge from reason, for the rationalist they belief that certain truths are innate to the human mind and its proponents are Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza and Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz. Other philosophers over the years have gone ahead to discover other sources of knowledge which are still a subset of rationalism and empiricism. Testimony as a source of knowledge has been a vital and neglected source of knowledge, it is so vital because as humans, right from birth we rely on the testimonies of others for our own identity, origin and literally the idea of who we are comes from the testimony of others, and without them we do not even know who we are. Some modern philosophers though have paid attention to testimonial knowledge, for instance, Thomas Reid (1710–1796), a Scottish philosopher and the founder of Scottish Common-Sense Realism, in his book – *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on Principles of Common Sense* (12) averred that testimony is a vital and innate means of acquiring knowledge. He was against the skepticism of some philosophers such as David Hume, who were skeptical about the reliability

of knowledge gotten through testimony and that in fact, testimony should be validated through personal experience or reasoning. Contrary to this view, Reid contented that testimony is a fundamental source of knowledge because humans have a natural inclination to tell the truth and people always trust what others say unless they have a reason not to. C. A. J. Coady, a contemporary philosopher supports Thomas Reid by asserting that testimony is a primary and essential source of knowledge (38). He was against reductionism just like Reid, he took the anti-reductionist standpoint by maintaining that for the fact that we depend on science, history, news and experts, shows that testimonial is fundamental in knowledge acquisition. Tyler Burge another contemporary philosopher in his highly esteemed paper – *Content Preservation* (485) views testimony as a socially warranted source of knowledge, this is because according to him knowledge is socially distributed and our trust in experts and institutions is vital for human understanding. He was also of the opinion that when testimony comes from reliable a source, we are justified in believing it without any news for personal verification. Elizabeth Fricker a contemporary British Philosopher also contributed to the discourse on testimonial knowledge and like other philosophers mentioned above she also supports the idea that testimonial knowledge is a primary and vital source of knowledge but in her seminal paper – *The Epistemology of Testimony* (58) she diverted by introducing the concept of defeaters. She claims that while we believe in justifying testimonial knowledge, we must also be epistemologically responsible in evaluation the trustworthiness of the source. John McDowell regards testimony as a legitimate and natural source of knowledge, one that is rooted in our social practices and rationality. He juxtaposes testimony to perception, arguing that just as we rely on our senses to provide us with immediate knowledge, we can also rely on testimony from others as a valid source of knowledge (196). Following the evaluation of some of the philosophers who have supported testimonial knowledge we shall therefore examine how testimonial knowledge play out in the teaching and learning experience.

Teaching /Teacher

Hearing the word "teacher" or "teaching" often immediately brings to mind the concept of school. The word teaching according to John Hattie (38) "is the deliberate act of providing opportunities for students to engage in learning through clear instruction, feedback, and adaptive practices that lead to measurable outcomes." This definition suggests that teaching is a deliberate and intentional, it is well planned by the teacher or the person doing the teaching.

Frankena (19) on the other hand, defined teaching as "the conscious and deliberate effort by a mature or experienced person to immature or less experienced person with the intention that the latter will learn or come to believe that he is taught on good grounds." Frankena takes a step further by stating that teaching must be done on good grounds; this means that the learner or student is convinced that what he is being taught is a good thing. It is important to note that the act of teaching is not carried out by just anyone or anyhow, the act of teaching must be carried out by a mature or experienced person who is the teacher. Now we can define a teacher as a more mature and experienced person who imparts knowledge to another person on good grounds. It was mentioned earlier that the act of teaching does not just happen anyhow or by anyone; Molagun (3) tells us that the act of teaching must involve:

- (i) A person who is consciously and deliberately teaching.
- (ii) Another person that is being taught
- (iii) Some content or material, information knowledge etc. being imparted
- (iv) An intention on the part of the person teaching that the recipient should learn.

The Expert

The word "expert" generally refers to an authority figure in a particular field or endeavour. For Alvin Goldman "an expert. . . in domain D is someone who possesses an extensive fund of knowledge (true belief) and a set of skills or methods for apt and successful deployment of this knowledge to new questions in the domain" (Goldman, 92). Merriam-Webster defines expert as ": one with the special skill or knowledge representing mastery of a particular subject" it also defines expert as "having, involving, or displaying special skill or knowledge derived from training or experience" (www.merriam-webster.com). This tells us that an expert is one that has the training and experience on a field or subject matter. Wikipedia on the other hand defines expert as somebody who has a broad and deep understanding and competence in terms of knowledge, skill and experience through practice and education in a particular field or area of study. Informally, an expert is someone widely recognized as a reliable source of technique or skill whose faculty for judging or deciding rightly, justly, or wisely is accorded authority and status by peers or the public in a specific well-distinguished domain. An expert, more generally, is a person with extensive knowledge or ability based on research, experience, or occupation and in a particular area of study (en.wikipedia.org/expert). From this definition it can be deduced that one does not confer on him/herself the title of an "expert" it is conferred on him/her by someone else other than him/herself.

Testimony

The word testimony is etymologically derived from the Latin word *testis*, which is further gotten from the Latin word *testimonium* which means "a witness". According to Bone, testimony refers to the evidence of a witness usually given in court and usually under oath (376). This definition is telling us that testimony is the evidence of a witness. In philosophy, testimony is a proposition conveyed by one entity (person or group) to another entity, whether through speech or writing or through facial expression, that is based on the entity's knowledge base (Robert 217-236). In the courtroom, when we talk about testimony, what we mean is that "someone sworn in, testifies, offering information that is supposed to represent what the person knows or believes. Often such testimony recounts what was witnessed first-hand, but informal testimony can be an expression of what we believe about something such as the implication of scientific theory or the potentials of human character (Audi, 150). Testimony therefore, is the conveying of an information by someone to someone else, which could be in oral or written form.

Testimony as a Source of Knowledge

Knowledge has many sources, but one of the most important and often neglected source of knowledge is testimonial knowledge or knowledge derived from the testimonies of others. This type of knowledge provides information that shape our attitude and beliefs (Bewaji, 79). It is through this type of knowledge that we are exposed to personal knowledge such as our own names and dates of birth, factual knowledge such as the heliocentric solar system and everyday knowledge... (Moran 323). Nor is apparently 'direct' experience free of testimonial influence, for experience rarely comes to us unmediated by theory (in the loose sense of the word) but is filtered and coloured by what we have already heard and read about similar things, events and phenomena (323), and in fact "we cannot make much epistemic progress without the testimony of others". David Hume in agreement with Moran declares that:

... there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful and even necessary to human life than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators (323).

Hume is insinuating here that humans cannot do without testimonial knowledge and in fact without testimonial knowledge we will not make much epistemic progress.

Testimonial knowledge can be transmitted orally, which comes usually from eye witnesses or from historical and scientific sources; from persons who have first-hand knowledge of the events and ideas related (Bewaji 79). It could also be in written form which are gotten traditionally from inscription on walls (graffiti), stones, animal skins and also from books, and internet. Testimony can also be in dramatized forms, gotten from symbols and symbolic representations.

Despite the importance of testimonial knowledge, testimony harbours some moral considerations including the problem of knowing or ascertaining the intention, mind or goal of the testifier (NOUN Module 106). It is for this reason that Sean Moran identifies trustworthiness, competence and sincerity as factors that one must consider in evaluating testimonial knowledge (Moran, 323).

The controversy on testimonial knowledge can be divided into three (1) competency of the testifier (2) virtue or character of the testifier and (3) the mode of transmission. If a competent or an expert in a field makes a claim, there is the tendency to accept or believe such a person than if such a claim is made by an incompetent person. This consideration is what the fallacy of appeal to authority attempt address. The view that knowledge is possessed by experts or authorities in different field is referred to as epistemic authority. To acquire knowledge and increase understanding of issues, many of people rely and trust in the competence of scholars, teachers, books written by organizations etc. This mode of acquiring knowledge has become an integral part of the school system and social education. (NOUN Module 106).

People do not normally doubt the opinion of experts unlike that of common people. However, the synergy and agreement between the opinions of the masses (known as majority opinion) are at times seen as a credible source of information. The system of democracy common to contemporary societies is predicated on the belief that a majority opinion must be truer or better than individuals. (Honer et al 80). In this wise, the argument is that what is true for the majority is also true for any individual. (NOUN Module, 106).

At the basis of justification of testimonial knowledge is the character or virtue of the epistemic agent. In Yoruba epistemology for instance, testimony is placed in the realm of second hand information. Though testimony is an acceptable source of knowledge in this culture, the acceptability is nevertheless dependent on the character of the agent. Competence without character is frowned at in Yoruba philosophical world view. A competent person with bad or doubtful character can only possess *ogbon-Arekereke* (dubious knowledge) (Akande 262)

Jennifer Lackey's Notion of Testimony

Lackey is a social epistemologist who paid so much attention to the notion of testimony; talking about its importance, she emphasized that everything we know depends on the testimonies of others, what we eat, how things work, where we go and even who we are. We do not, after all, perceive firsthand the preparation of the ingredients in many of our meals, or the construction of the devices we use to get around the world, or the layout of our planet, or our own births and familial histories. These are all things we are told. Indeed, subtracting from our lives the information that we possess via testimony leaves them barely recognizable. Scientific discoveries, battles won and lost, geographical developments, customs and traditions of distant lands—all of these facts would be completely lost to us. It is, therefore, no surprise that the importance of testimony, both epistemological and practical, is nearly universally accepted (Lackey 2011, 71). Lackey defines testimony as follows:

"S testifies that p by making an act of communication a, if and only if (in part) in virtue of a's communicable content, (1) S reasonably intends to convey the information that p or (2) a is reasonably taken as conveying the information that p" (Lackey, 2008 35).

In order to accept an invitation to trust, to confer epistemic justification directly on a testimonial belief acquired, then, the following two conditions must be satisfied:

1. the speaker's testimony must serve as a reliable guide to the truth, and
2. the hearer cannot have any relevant undefeated defeaters (i.e., "evidence available" that the speaker trusted "is untrustworthy") for accepting the invitation to trust the speaker.

According to Ekpo (58) testimony is not just mere telling or conversations. Suppose I make the assertion: "You look good today; I am merely passing a comment or somehow none inferential remarks based on subjective perception, this is why Lackey is of the view that "The concept of testimony is intimately connected with the notion of conveying information and thus statements such as 'you look good today, or 'what a lovely day' that function as mere conversational fillers and cheers should fail to qualify as instances of testimony" (72). According to her "not everything we learn from testimony of others qualifies as testimonially based". Lackey further asserts that, what is of importance for distinctively testimonial justification or knowledge is that a hearer forms a given belief on the basis of the content of a speaker's testimony (73).

Jennifer Lackey is known for arguing against the traditional view of testimony, according to which testimony is a merely transmissive, rather than a generative, epistemic source. On this view, hearers can acquire knowledge on the basis of testimony only if the speakers themselves possess the knowledge in question and thus testimony transmits knowledge from one person to another without being able to generate knowledge in its own right. In her work "In Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge", Lackey uses her widely discussed creationist teacher case, to make a case that it is possible to believe the testimony of a speaker who may not himself believe in his words. In her creationist teacher case, where the teacher is a devout Christian, committed to creationism, but nevertheless teaches the theory of evolution by presenting the scientific evidence scrupulously and asserting to her class that "modern-day homo sapiens evolved from homo erectus" (Lackey, 2008, 48). Although she herself does not believe what she teaches, the students form a true belief from her testimony. She is a reliable testifier but not a reliable believer. Such cases according to, Lackey show that testimony can be reliable even when belief is not reliable, and, as it is, the truth-reliability of testimony matters; it cannot be the case that the transmission of belief via testimony is either necessary or sufficient for testimonial knowledge. That is, it is not the case that: (1) a hearer knows that on the basis of a speaker's testimony that p if and only if the speaker herself knows that p; nor that (2) if a hearer comes to believe that p on the basis of the testimony of a speaker who herself knows that p, and he has no undefeated defeaters for believing that p, then the hearer knows that p.

Jennifer Lackey's Notion of Experts

Lackey in her work "*Experts and Peer Disagreement*" talked extensively on the issue of experts. She distinguished two types of experts: expert-as-authority and expert-as-advisor. Expert as authority according to Lackey can be justified via the sort of conscientious reflection discussed above. Understanding experts in this way provides a framework for capturing many of our ordinary beliefs and practices involving expertise (Lackey 2011, 232). When we are looking to identify an expert, it is commonly thought that what we want is someone whose

testimony reliably puts us in touch with the truth in a given domain. If we determine that someone is considerably better at doing this than we would if we formed beliefs on our own, it seems reasonable to treat the expert's reasoning as taking precedence (232). Lackey further avers that if the testimony of an authority is taken, not as providing a preemptive reason for belief, but as simply one piece of evidence to be weighed with one's other evidence, then it is said that one's record in getting at the truth will be worsened. Since acquiring true belief is a key epistemic goal, preemptively trusting the testimony of an authority is epistemically justified. Citing Raz and Zagzebski, Lackey opines that this shows not only that we ought to preemptively trust an authority if our goal is true belief, but also that "once we identify . . . an expert, we should follow that person's . . . advice all of the time" (232).

Turning to Expert as advisor, Lackey is the view that an expert that is an advisor does not give authoritative testimony or preemptive reasons for belief; rather, her testimony provides evidence for believing a given proposition and, in this way, offers guidance (238). Lackey further asserts that testimony of experts should always be regarded as a piece of evidence to be weighed with the other relevant evidence we have on the matter. Epistemically, then, experts should always be regarded as advisors (239). This is because When offering guidance or advice, certain features of the proffered testimony become far more important than when the testimony is authoritative (239).

Experts focuses not only on their testimony and beliefs, but also on their broader character traits (239). For we might not be interested only in experts helping us reach the truth but in how they help us reach the truth. (240). She emphasizes that we ought to be experts as advisors rather than experts as authorities. For even if I cannot tell who is more reliable in a given domain, I surely can tell who is better at effectively clarifying the terrain, or at being a sensitive listener, or at being open-minded to the issues that are of concern to me. These skills and virtues can still be present even when the correct answer is unclear. Moreover, disagreement between experts can be beneficial when what is being sought is advice rather than an authoritative directive since there is more evidence available to be weighed when arriving at a conclusion (240). This is because a teacher reliably offering true testimony is important, but equally important are her abilities to clearly explain the terrain, to listen attentively and receptively to the concerns and values of those around her, and to answer questions in a thoughtful and constructive way. This is a place where the intellectual and moral virtues are relevant (239-240). A dogmatic and close-minded teacher might offer lots of true statements to her students but she might do so in a way that fails to move the students. They might feel ignored or bullied, which might result in the expert's testimony failing to gain any traction with them, thereby leaving them with fewer true beliefs (240).

Conclusion

Jennifer Lackey's notion of experts is very important in the teaching profession, from her theory on experts, teachers can be admonished to strive to be experts as advisors and not experts as authority, that is, people who not only convey information to their students but who go beyond that to say what they have to say to their students in a way that it makes them feel valued, respected and loved as individuals, and this we can say is lacking in the educational sectors. In the teaching profession, there have been cases in the past where a student became depressed by the teachers hurtful words and as a result ended up committing suicide, for instance in Viqarunnisa Noon School and College (Bangladesh, 2018). According to wikipedia in December 2018, a ninth-grade student named Arित्र्य Adhikari from Viqarunnisa Noon School and College in Dhaka, Bangladesh, committed suicide because Arित्र्य was reportedly scolded by teachers for possessing a mobile phone during class, leading to significant distress.

There are also cases where teachers mock and ridicule their students because they are lagging behind in their academics, I have personally witnessed this in the school where I currently teach, attitude like this from teachers ought not to be so, the teachers words should build, mould, and bring out the little lights embedded in the students. Therefore, teacher's and every teacher figure in the society ought to strive to be expert as advisors.

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