Introduction

0.1 INTRODUCTION

Linguistic communication is a pervasive feature of human life. Some of this communication involves the transmission of a piece of knowledge from speaker to hearer. In this book I argue that a proper account of the sort of communication that aims at the transmission of knowledge will have substantial implications for both the philosophy of mind and language, and for epistemology.

The burden of Part I (chapters 1–4) is to provide a novel argument for anti-individualism about mind and language. According to such views, the psychological properties instantiated by a subject, as well as the semantic (meaning) properties of her words, depend for their individuation on features of her social and natural environment. These views are quite popular, owing in large part to the seminal work of Tyler Burge and Hilary Putnam. Here I offer a novel argument for such views. Standardly, anti-individualistic views in the philosophy of mind and language are taken to be supported by considerations such as the semantics of speech- and attitude-reports, subjects' incomplete grasp of their own concepts, speakers' semantic deference to (some subset of) speakers in their linguistic community, the possibility of non-standard theorizing, or the objectivity of perceptual representations. My argument, by contrast, depends on none of these considerations. Rather, it reorients the discussion, focusing instead on the conditions on knowledge communication: I argue that a proper account of the semantic dimension of linguistic communication (pertaining to the hearer's comprehension of the source speech act), together with humdrum facts about the sorts of circumstance under which hearers acquire a communicated piece of knowledge, yield anti-individualistic results regarding linguistic meaning, speech content, and the propositional attitudes.

In Part II of the book (chapters 5–8) I move from the semantic to the epistemic dimension of knowledge communication. My claim here is that,

when it comes to the sort of belief one acquires through accepting another's testimony, the belief's epistemic characteristics – including whether it amounts to knowledge, and (more controversially) whether it is justified and/or rationally sustained – depend on facts regarding the members of the linguistic community within which one has acquired and sustained the testimonial belief. Such a view falls within a category I designate as *epistemic* anti-individualism: the view is a version of epistemic externalism, in that it entails that not all of the materials that make for epistemic justification can be discerned through the subject's searching reflection; but it is a novel, *anti-individualistic* sort of epistemic externalism, in that it regards the epistemic characteristics of a subject's (testimony based) beliefs as depending on features of the cognitive and linguistic acts *of the subject's social peers*.

The book's overarching ambition, then, is to show that the conditions on knowledge communication motivate a broadly anti-individualistic account of both *what* we know (i.e., the conceptual, propositional contents of our knowledge), and the fact *that* we know (or justifiedly believe).

0.2 THE SEMANTIC DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION

Chapter 1 sets the stage by describing the nature of the sort of knowledge whose conditions I subsequently go on to explore in the rest of the book. Schematically, testimonial knowledge is testimonially grounded belief whose testimonial grounds satisfy the conditions on knowledge. The notion of testimonially grounded belief is spelled out in terms of the notion of the hearer's *epistemic reliance* on a piece of testimony. Borrowing from the literature on the norm of assertion, I argue that a hearer relies epistemically on testimony when she acquires a belief grounded in her (implicit) assumption that the testimony in question satisfies the epistemic norm(s) appropriate to testimony. (One's view of the precise epistemic strength of this ground will depend on one's view of the norm of assertion; my argument is neutral on this matter.) I go on to argue that a testimonially grounded belief amounts to testimonial knowledge when, in virtue of features of its testimonial ground, it satisfies the remaining conditions on knowledge. These conditions I spell out by using the notion of reliability to stand in for the non-accidentality condition on knowledge. The result, I argue, is that testimonially grounded belief amounts to testimonial knowledge only if (a) the *source testimony* itself was reliable, in the sense that the testimony would have been proferred only if true; (b) the hearer's recovery

of the attested proposition was based on a *reliable comprehension* process; and (c) the hearer's acceptance of the testimony was the upshot of a reliable capacity to *distinguish reliable attestations from unreliable ones*. The structure of the book is then organized around these three necessary conditions on testimonial knowledge. The remainder of Part I (chapters 2–4) concerns the semantic dimension of a hearer's reaction to proffered testimony, and so focuses mainly on (b); Part II (chapters 5–8) concerns those aspects of communication that are more traditionally regarded as constituting the epistemic dimension of communication, focusing on (a) and (c).

In chapter 2 I present the first of two arguments in support of the postulation of public linguistic norms. Here the argument is from successful communication, cases in which a hearer comes to know that *p*, through recognizing that she has been told that *p*. Since successful communication involves cases in which the hearer acquires the very piece of knowledge expressed in the assertion, such cases presuppose the satisfaction of condition (b), the reliable comprehension condition. But successful communication has several other characteristics which make it hard to see how (b) could be satisfied in all of the cases in which knowledge is testimonially transmitted. In particular, successful communication is *prevalent*; it amounts to an *efficient* way to spread knowledge; and it is *linguistically undemanding*, in the sense that it remains an efficient and pervasive way to spread knowledge even under conditions in which the speaker and hearer know nothing about each other's speech and interpretative dispositions, save what is manifest in their brief communicative exchange itself. My thesis is that without appeal to public linguistic norms, we have no explanation for how successful communication *could* have these characteristics, since we would then have no explanation for the prevalence of cases satisfying the reliable comprehension condition.

In chapter 3 I present the second of my two arguments in support of the postulation of public linguistic norms. While the argument here still highlights condition (b), the reliable comprehension condition, the crucial premise concerns cases in which this condition *fails* to be satisfied. In particular, I argue that a proper account of *mis*understanding (in cases of would-be knowledge communication) also requires the postulation of such norms. Cases of misunderstanding are cases of a breakdown in the activity whereby a speaker aims to share knowledge. I argue that responsibility for the breakdown cannot be determined in a principled way without recourse to the norms of the shared language. This is because the ascription of responsibility must determine whether the case is one in

which the speaker mis-spoke, or one in which the hearer misinterpreted the speaker's remark. Such a matter cannot be answered in a principled way, I argue, unless there is a 'standard' interpretation of *S*'s remark, since it is the standard interpretation that enables us to distinguish cases of misspeaking from cases of misinterpretation. I go on to argue that there is nothing that might provide the 'standard' interpretation save the linguistic norms of a shared, public language.

In chapter 4 I appeal to the existence of public linguistic norms as part of an extended argument for various anti-individualistic results – regarding speech content, linguistic meaning, and ultimately the attitudes. Here I develop the idea that, if public linguistic norms are to play the roles assigned to them in the arguments of chapters 2 and 3, these norms must specify the conditions on correct application for the various expressions in one's idiolect. Various anti-individualistic doctrines can then be reached by a familiar sort of thought experiment in which we vary the public linguistic norms at play in a speech exchange, without varying any of the individualistic facts regarding the hearer. When we do so, we see that there could be two hearers, type-identical in their intrinsic (non-relational) properties, who differ in what they believe owing to differences in the public linguistic norms in play. (This difference of belief follows from the prior difference in knowledge: the respective testimonies communicate different pieces of knowledge to the two hearers, so, on the assumption that knowledge implies belief, the hearers believe different things.)

As an argument for anti-individualism about language and thought, this sort of argument can appear quite similar to arguments Tyler Burge has given. However, two features of my argument are noteworthy. First, as an argument for Attitude Anti-Individualism (AAI), the premises I use do not rely on any of the premises used in traditional arguments for AAI. Rather, the argument seeks to establish AAI directly by appeal to the conditions on knowledge communication, together with humdrum facts regarding the actual prevalence and efficiency of such communication. Relatedly, and second, my argument reveals that the phenomena often taken to be at the core of the case for AAI – in particular, incomplete grasp and semantic deference – can themselves be traced to the conditions on knowledge communication, and in particular to our *epistemic reliance* on the other members of our linguistic community.

The conclusion of Part I is that, to the extent that we depend for our knowledge of the world on the say-so of others, *what* we know are contents constituted by the concepts and categories we inherit from the

public language – concepts and categories that a hearer consumes (or sustains) in the very act of consuming others' say-so itself.

0.3 THE EPISTEMIC DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION

In Part II I move from the linguistic dimension of knowledge communication – the process by which communicated messages are *understood* – to those features of knowledge communication that are more commonly taken up in discussions of the epistemological dimension of communication – conditions (a) and (c) of the three necessary conditions above. My main thesis in Part II is that, in cases of testimonially grounded belief, one's instantiation of *many* epistemic properties – knowledge, warrant, justification, and rationality – depends on facts about one's social environment. As a result, taking a proper account of the epistemic dimension of this process will involve endorsing various *epistemically anti-individualist* doctrines.

In chapter 5, I present an initial case, to be supplemented in subsequent chapters, for several epistemically anti-individualistic results. I begin by arguing for two theses that may be uncontroversial in any case: whether a hearer counts as having acquired knowledge through another's testimony, and the amount of warrant enjoyed by her testimonial belief, both depend on facts pertaining to the satisfaction of (a), the condition on reliable testimony. These theses can be established by reflecting on pairs of cases, alike as to the hearers' excellent reasons for accepting the testimony and as to their properly functioning cognitive systems, but different as to the actual reliability of the testimony each has accepted. The result is that whether a hearer *knows* through testimony, and (more generally) the amount of warrant her testimonial belief enjoys, depend on more than her reasons for accepting the testimony and the proper functionality of her cognitive system. Since her status as knowing depends as well on epistemic properties of the testimony itself, anti-individualism about testimonial knowledge and warrant immediately follow. This conclusion is, perhaps, unremarkable, but it does have one interesting implication: knowledge-relevant exterrnal factors sometimes include those pertaining to the individual's *social* ('anti-individualistic') environment. I conclude chapter 5 by using this idea to make an initial case for a more controversial doctrine: whether a subject is *justified* in accepting a piece of testimony depends on features of her social ('anti-individualistic') environment. The controversial doctrine follows from *anti-reductionism*, an account of justified acceptance that (I argue) we have independent reasons to accept.

However, my positive case for anti-reductionism does not address some of the difficulties that anti-reductionist accounts are sometimes said to face. In chapter 6 I address the first of two such difficulties, based on Elizabeth Fricker's (1994) allegation that anti-reductionism is a recipe for gullibility. I argue that her contention is baseless. In the course of doing so, I identify another source of support for anti-reductionist approaches to the justified acceptance of testimony. I claim that such views are supported by a parallel with what makes for epistemic justification in other domains where reliable belief-fixation is achieved through largely subcognitive processing (memory and perception, for example).

In chapter 7 I address the second of the two difficulties that are thought to face more 'externalist' accounts of the conditions on justified acceptance (such as anti-reductionism). This difficulty, based on a point raised by Fricker in a more recent paper, is that more 'externalist' approaches sever the connection between justified acceptance of testimony and the rationality of testimonial belief. After developing this difficulty, I establish two points. First, anyone who accepts the anti-individualistic conclusion regarding testimonial warrant from chapter 5 – which is to say virtually everyone, *regardless* of their preferred account of justified acceptance of testimony – will be facing one or another difficulty on the present score. Second, once we compare the strengths and weaknesses of the various contending positions, none seems to provide anything as strong as a reason to reject the epistemically anti-individualistic results so far obtained. One implication of my argument here is that the very rationality of testimonial belief is itself socially diffuse: the rational standing of one's testimonial belief depends on facts regarding the (cognitive and epistemic) practices of one's co-linguals. I conclude the chapter by offering positive reasons for thinking that there is indeed an ineliminably social dimension to assessments of rationality generally (and of the rationality of testimonial belief in particular).

I conclude Part II (in chapter 8) by arguing that there are cases in which the satisfaction of condition (c) above, the reliable discrimination condition, implicates the agent's social surroundings. The argument here focuses on the consumption of testimony by cognitively immature children. Given their cognitive immaturity, very young children are not reliable in their discrimination of reliable from unreliable testimony. Even so, they acquire testimonial knowledge – so the reliable discrimination condition must somehow be satisfied. My claim is that a proper account of the process through which cognitively immature children consume testimony

must include the credibility monitoring role performed *by the child's adult guardian(s)*. It is only in this way that the child's resulting testimonial beliefs can be seen as satisfying the reliable discrimination condition, despite their own cognitive immaturity, in all and only those cases in which, intuitively, we want to treat those beliefs as amounting to testimonial knowledge. Such a claim is an instance of what (following language of Andy Clark and David Chalmers) I will call an 'active' epistemic anti-individualism; and the position I develop bears some affinities to the hypothesis of extended (or distributed) cognition in the philosophy of mind. So the book closes on a note suggesting that the epistemic dimension of knowledge communication is even more social than traditional epistemic categories ('knowledge,' 'warrant,' 'justification,' 'rationality') would lead us to expect.

0.4 THE BIG PICTURE

I should note that the contemporary literature regarding the 'epistemology of testimony' has already devoted a good deal of attention to the nature of knowledge acquired through others' speech. Although I see the chapters of Part II as contributing to this discussion, there is an important sense in which my fundamental goal here is deeper than merely contributing to contemporary discussions on the epistemology of testimony. For although I will be developing a position that will be recognizable as an *anti-reductionistic* view in the epistemology of testimony, my more fundamental aim is to suggest that such a view is a response to one aspect of a phenomenon whose significance outstrips epistemology proper. The phenomenon, of course, is our epistemic reliance on other speakers. I believe that a proper appreciation of this reliance requires taking an anti-reductionistic (and so, I will argue, an anti-individualistic) position in the epistemology of testimony; but I also believe – and it is the burden of Part I to establish – that it requires taking an anti-individualistic position regarding linguistic meaning and mental content as well. To my mind, these various anti-individualist doctrines in semantics and epistemology are all parts of a single picture – a picture that emerges only when we consider communication in both its semantic and its epistemic dimensions. It is precisely this sort of picture that I aim to be developing in this book.

PART I

Semantic anti-individualism

1

The nature of knowledge communication

1.1 INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that we acquire a good deal of our knowledge through the written or spoken word. Our knowledge of geography, science, and history; of current events; and even of our own names, parents, and birthdays – all of this (and more besides) involves knowledge we have acquired through accepting what others have told us. Without such knowledge we would be much less well-off, epistemically speaking, than we actually are.

While the existence of such knowledge is uncontroversial, its nature is not. There are debates regarding various related topics: whether another's say-so amounts to a kind of evidence (and if so, what kind); whether the justification or entitlement for accepting say-so derives from one's positive reasons for thinking that the say-so is credible; whether justification is even necessary for this sort of knowledge; whether the knowledge we acquire in this way is an epistemically basic sort of knowledge (and if so, in what sense); whether knowledge can be merely transmitted through testimony, or whether there can be cases in which a speaker *generates* knowledge for her hearer that she herself lacks; and how this sort of knowledge compares to other kinds of knowledge – in particular, perceptual or memorial knowledge.

I will have much to say on most of these topics, but for the most part I will reserve my own positive views on them for Part II of this book. Here, in Part I, I propose to remain as neutral as I can on these topics. I do so since my aim here is to establish certain conclusions regarding the *semantics* of communication. I believe that a proper account of knowledge communication through speech will have substantive implications on this score. My aim is to draw out these implications without taking on substantial commitments on the epistemic topics mentioned above.

This initial chapter serves that aim by presenting a characterization of the sort of knowledge that is at issue. In order to remain neutral on the

epistemic issues mentioned above, my characterization here will of necessity be schematic: I will point out how those issues bear on my schematic account, without offering a definitive position on them. However, while it is schematic, my characterization will be far from empty: on the basis of it I will be arguing that the knowledge in question is epistemically distinctive (see esp. section 1.6 of this chapter), and that a proper account of this sort of distinctive knowledge calls for endorsing various anti-individualistic doctrines in semantics (chapters 2–4). (I go on, in Part II (chapters 5–8), to argue that a proper account of this sort of knowledge also calls for endorsing various anti-individualistic doctrines in epistemology as well: it is here that I will take sides on the issues above.)

To describe the sort of knowledge that will form the subject-matter of this book I will use 'knowledge through speech',[1] 'testimonial knowledge', and 'knowledge through testimony',[2] more or less interchangeably. In what follows I attempt to identify some non-trivial characteristics of this sort of knowledge. Where neutrality on the substantive epistemic issues identified above is not possible, I will offer arguments on behalf of the positions I do take up.

1.2 KNOWLEDGE THROUGH SPEECH: INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT-MATTER

An initial question is this: how can a hearer acquire knowledge through observing another's speech? Assuming that knowledge involves belief that is non-accidentally true,[3] a first reformulation of our question might be: under what conditions does a hearer's observing another's speech result in the hearer's forming a belief that is non-accidentally true?

[1] I use 'knowledge through speech' as shorthand for a sort of knowledge one could acquire through written language as well. (Of course, knowledge through written language introduces a host of complications beyond those involved in knowledge through speech, mainly in connection with the issue of context. I will not have very much to say about these complications in this book; I hope to return to this at a later time.)

[2] 'Testimony' is the term used in the epistemology literature for speech acts apt for the transmission of this sort of knowledge.

[3] The idea that knowledge is incompatible with luck has been the basis of a new and very interesting development of an anti-luck epistemology: see Pritchard 2005. Of course, there are those who think knowledge is merely true belief: see for example Sartwell 1991 and 1992. See also Goldman 1999, where the suggestion is made that the notion of knowledge as merely true belief is useful for epistemology (even as he agrees that a more robust notion of knowledge is also useful).