CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

1 Introduction

Testimony and the Transmission of Knowledge

The purpose of this book is to identify, and then theorize, a distinctive and important phenomenon that has gone largely unrecognized in epistemology. To get a rough idea of the phenomenon I have in mind, we can invoke an intuitive distinction between the *generation* of knowledge and the *transmission* of knowledge. Very roughly, generation concerns coming to know "for oneself," as when one perceives something, or reasons to a conclusion on the basis of good evidence. Transmission, in contrast, concerns coming to know "from someone else," as when one is told by someone else who knows. Another way to locate the phenomenon of interest is to invoke a distinction between the production of knowledge and its distribution. Knowledge generation is about producing knowledge, in the sense of bringing it into existence. Knowledge transmission is about distributing knowledge that already exists.

I said that the phenomenon of knowledge transmission has gone largely unrecognized in epistemology. The lack of recognition comes in two varieties. First, most of the epistemological tradition has been entirely oblivious to the phenomenon. It is not implausible that traditional epistemology – for example, empiricism, rationalism, Kantian constructivism – has been concerned with the generation of knowledge *rather* than the transmission of knowledge. If we think of an economy of knowledge, composed of the production and distribution of epistemic goods, traditional epistemology has left out half the economy.

A second variety of unrecognition characterizes more recent epistemology. Contemporary authors have indeed shown interest in the transmission of knowledge, but their discussions have been groping, and often distorting. One cause of the distortion is that many authors think that *all* testimonial knowledge involves knowledge transmission. Accordingly, they try to give a general epistemology of testimony, rather than an epistemology of knowledge transmission proper. A second cause of the distortion has been the absence of adequate

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

categories for theorizing the transmission of knowledge. To use a different metaphor, contemporary discussions in the epistemology of testimony are framed by categories that fail to cut at the joints.

Later in this first chapter, I work to address both of these distorting influences. In Section 1.1, I locate our target phenomenon in such a way that some but not all testimony is at the service of knowledge transmission, with the result that some but not all testimonial knowledge counts as transmitted knowledge. In Section 1.2, I redraw some familiar categories in the epistemology of testimony so as to better characterize our target and related phenomena. Completing these tasks will allow us to better frame our questions, and to better see the possible answers.

A central thesis of the book is that knowledge transmission is irreducible to knowledge generation, and for that reason requires its own theoretical treatment. More specifically, I will argue that an adequate account of transmission must go beyond the usual theoretical resources of traditional epistemology – i.e., beyond those resources that the tradition uses to theorize knowledge generation. Accordingly, the overarching project of the book is to properly articulate and adequately defend an anti-reductionist theory of knowledge transmission.

1.1 Locating the Phenomenon

The purpose of this first part of the chapter is to locate our target phenomenon – what I have been calling the transmission of knowledge, understood in such a way as to be distinct from knowledge generation. We may begin by considering what some contemporary philosophers have said about knowledge transmission. As I said above, I believe that theorizing about the phenomenon has had a groping quality to it, sometimes to the point of being distorting. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to consider what some philosophers have claimed about the general idea of transmitting knowledge, and why they have thought it to be an interesting phenomenon.

First, it is common to assign knowledge transmission a special role in the economy of knowledge. Whereas perception, introspection, reasoning, and the like serve to generate or produce knowledge, testimony is often thought to serve a different role. This special role motivates a second theme in the contemporary literature: that a necessary condition for transmitting knowledge that p, is that the speaker knows that p. The idea here is that one cannot transmit what one does not have,

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

and so those who occupy the transmission role must have knowledge to transmit.

A third common theme is that knowledge transmission serves to relieve the hearer of the usual burdens associated with non-testimonial knowledge. Thus, testimony is often thought to transmit knowledge, rather than generate it, in a way that hearers need not "do the usual work" involved in coming to know for oneself.[1] A related idea is that transmission allows for epistemic *dependence* of a distinctive and important sort, and a further related idea is that transmission allows for an epistemic division of labor.[2]

A fourth common theme is that some such phenomenon is necessary to account for the extent of our knowledge. That is, we need something like knowledge transmission, and the epistemic dependence and division of labor that it allows, to account for all the knowledge that we think we have. Indeed, one of the strongest motivations for defending knowledge transmission, in the special sense intended, has been to avoid unwelcome skeptical results.[3]

Next, let's consider some paradigmatic examples of our target phenomenon. In all of these cases, assuming that the speaker knows the thing she is telling, the hearer plausibly comes to know by means of being told. This is not to say, necessarily, that the hearer comes to know *merely* by being told. Thus, one can accept that there is a special phenomenon of knowledge transmission without endorsing the idea that transmission requires no epistemic work at all on the part of the hearer. More importantly, it is plausible that the hearer depends on the speaker for her knowledge in some significant and distinctive way. In some important sense, the speaker manages to "pass on" or "hand down" her knowledge to the hearer, and in a way that relieves the

[1] As Alejandro Pérez Carballo comments, not all non-testimonial knowledge involves a lot of work. For example, consider easy perceptual knowledge. Accordingly, talk about "the usual burdens" is more felicitous than talk about "the usual work." Similarly, talk about "not doing the same work" is more felicitous than talk about "doing less work." See Alejandro Pérez Carballo, "On Greco on Transmission," *Episteme* 13, 4 (2016): 499–505.

[2] For example, Michael Welbourne, *The Community of Knowledge* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986). For an extended discussion of the division of epistemic labor, see Sanford Goldberg, "The Division of Epistemic Labor," *Episteme* 8, 1 (2011): 112–125.

[3] For example, see John Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence," *Journal of Philosophy* 82, 7 (1985): 335–349; and C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

hearer of the usual burdens associated with non-testimonial knowledge. Here are some cases that seem to fit that bill:

Case 1. A mother tells her three-year-old son that there is milk in the refrigerator, and he believes her.[4]

Case 2. A second-grade social studies teacher points to the map and tells his students that the United States is in North America. On that basis, his students come to believe that this is the case.

Case 3. An accountant tells her client that the tax laws for the current year have changed, and that as a result some previous deductions are no longer allowed. The client believes her and acts accordingly.

Case 4. A doctor tells her patient that his lab results have come back negative. He believes her and is relieved.

Case 5. A city clerk tells a resident that plastic bottles can be left at the transfer station for recycling. The resident believes her and heads for the transfer station.

Again, in each of these cases it is natural to think that the hearer comes to know by being told, and in a way that "passes on" knowledge from speaker to hearer. Furthermore, it is plausible to think that, by virtue of the testimonial exchange, the hearer is relieved of at least some of the burden involved in coming to know in non-testimonial ways. Importantly, these features are *not* plausibly present in all testimonial exchanges. For example, consider the following cases:

Case 6. A used car salesman tells a customer that the car has had one previous owner, and has never been in an accident. The customer believes him and happily buys the car on that basis.

Case 7. A personnel director interviewing a job applicant asks her if she has relevant experience, and she assures him that she does. The director believes her and hires her on the spot.

Case 8. A police officer asks a suspect whether he was at the scene of the crime, and the suspect tells him he was not. The officer believes him and goes on to question someone else.

[4] Sanford Goldberg, "Testimonial Knowledge in Early Childhood, Revisited," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76, 1 (2008): 11.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

In these latter cases, even if the speaker is telling the truth, and knows what she tells, it is not natural to think that the speaker is in the same sense "passing on" knowledge to the hearer. Likewise, in these cases it is plausible that the hearer *does* incur burdens similar to those involved in non-testimonial knowledge. For example, in Case 6, the buyer had better have some evidence that the salesman is being honest. In Case 8, the police officer had better have some evidence that corroborates what the suspect says. Accordingly, even theorists who embrace the idea of knowledge transmission should not hold that all testimonial exchanges transmit knowledge – not even in all cases where the speaker knows, and not even in all cases where the hearer comes to know via a knowledgeable speaker's testimony. The better idea is that knowledge transmission is a special phenomenon, even within the category of testimonial knowledge.[5]

By way of summary, I have been trying to better locate a distinctive phenomenon of important epistemological interest – a phenomenon I have labeled the *transmission of knowledge*. By way of doing so, I have looked at some things that are commonly said about knowledge transmission, and I have pointed to some seemingly paradigmatic cases. Specifically, knowledge transmission, in the special sense intended, is something *opposed* to knowledge generation, playing a different role in the economy of knowledge, so to speak. Moreover, in cases of knowledge transmission, the hearer depends on the speaker in a way that allows the hearer to know, but without incurring the usual epistemic burdens associated with other ways of coming to know. In this sense, a division of epistemic labor is achieved, allowing the hearer to know more while doing less. On the other hand, we should recognize that not all testimonial exchanges manage to transmit knowledge. Even in cases in which the speaker has knowledge, the hearer sometimes must do considerable epistemic work to gain knowledge from testimony. That is, in some testimonial exchanges, the hearer incurs the same or similar burdens associated with coming to know in non-testimonial cases.

[5] In this respect see John Greco, "Recent Work on Testimonial Knowledge," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49, 1 (2012): 15–28; and Stephan Wright, "In Defence of Transmission," *Episteme* 12, 1 (2015): 13–28. For similar reasons, Faulkner and others distinguish between "knowledge from testimony" and "testimonial knowledge." See Paul Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

The general picture that I will develop and defend in this book is consistent with these characteristic claims about transmission canvassed above, and explanatory of our paradigmatic cases. First and foremost, that picture endorses the anti-reductionist thesis already articulated above: Knowledge generation and knowledge transmission constitute distinct phenomena, and in such a way that the latter is not reducible to the former.

I said that knowledge transmission, understood this way, has been more or less off the radar screen of traditional epistemology, and under-theorized in the contemporary literature. It is true, as we have seen, that contemporary epistemology does talk about "the transmission of knowledge." But in many cases, what is meant by "transmission" is not a distinctive phenomenon of special interest. For example, many contemporary theorists in effect treat knowledge transmission as back-to-back cases of knowledge generation: First, knowledge is generated in one person by some standard source, for example by perception, and then knowledge is generated in a second person by a different source, in this case testimony. For example, evidentialists often make a distinction between perceptual evidence and testimonial evidence, but then treat both perceptual and testimonial knowledge as true belief grounded in the knower's evidence. Likewise, virtue theorists often make a distinction between testimonial and non-testimonial virtues, but then treat all knowledge as true belief produced by virtues seated in the knower. Put differently, both theories treat testimonial and non-testimonial knowledge as species of a common genus, and both think of the genus in terms of knowledge *generation*. In that sense, there is nothing particularly special, and nothing very interesting, about the transmission of knowledge.

It is important to note that this is the attitude even of many so-called "anti-reductionists" about testimonial knowledge. Thus, to count as an anti-reductionist on the contemporary scene, it is enough to hold that testimonial knowledge has a different *source* than other kinds of knowledge (different evidence, different processes, different virtues). But one can hold that and still think that transmission is constituted by back-to-back cases of generation, that transmission can be "reduced" to generation in that sense. The alternative view, and the one that I will be defending here, is that knowledge transmission is a distinctive phenomenon, irreducible to knowledge generation. Again, the analogy to an economy is helpful: production is one thing, distribution another.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

Suppose that this general picture is right – that knowledge generation and knowledge transmission are distinct and important phenomena, neither reducible to the other. One consequence of this is that there really are two ways of "coming to know." That is, there is *coming to know for oneself*, via some generating source of knowledge, and there is *coming to know from someone else*, via knowledge transmission. On the one hand, this is highly intuitive – it can seem like no more than a platitude about our familiar epistemic lives. On the other hand, it means that all of traditional epistemology, and almost all of contemporary epistemology, leave out half the story about "coming to know." It would be as if standard economics textbooks talked only about the production of economic goods, leaving out the entire topic of distribution!

My approach, then, will be to embrace the intuitive distinction from the beginning of the chapter. It will be to treat generation and transmission as distinctive phenomena, and to give knowledge transmission its own theoretical treatment. To that end, it will be necessary to first engage in some further stage setting. In Section 1.2, I do some reorganizing according to my own categories. This reorganization is designed to take seriously the distinction between knowledge generation and knowledge transmission, and to bring the importance of transmission into high relief. Section 1.3 looks at the theoretical options for epistemology, once the distinction between transmission and generation is taken seriously. One important issue here regards whether a "unified" epistemology is still possible. That is, even if we agree that knowledge transmission cannot be reduced to knowledge generation, we can still ask whether both can be understood within a common theoretical framework, such as reliabilism or evidentialism. Section 1.4 outlines the remainder of the book.

1.2 Redrawing Categories in the Epistemology of Testimony

The issue that has perhaps most dominated the epistemology of testimony is the debate between so-called reductionists and anti-reductionists. Very roughly, reductionists think that testimonial knowledge can be subsumed under some other species of knowledge – for example, inductive knowledge. The idea here is that testimonial knowledge is just more inductive knowledge, distinguished only by the epistemically superficial fact that the induction concerns testimony and

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

testifiers. For example, in testimonial knowledge we generalize from previous experience regarding what kinds of testifiers are trustworthy, what kinds of conditions promote true testimony, etc. The anti-reductionist idea is that testimonial knowledge cannot be understood as a species of some other kind of knowledge – that testimonial knowledge is its "own kind of thing" and cannot be reduced to something else.

In fact, there are many different "reductionism–anti-reductionism" debates in the testimony literature, as these terms have been defined in a myriad of ways. For example, some philosophers associate anti-reductionism with a view about default justification, or the idea that testimonial beliefs are "innocent until proven guilty." Other philosophers have framed the debate in terms of whether testimonial beliefs are "foundational," in the sense of not based on reasons or evidence. What is worse, many philosophers have written as if these various positions (and more) cluster together, so that if one is a reductionist (or anti-reductionist) in one sense, one must be a reductionist (or anti-reductionist) in the others. On my view, these various ways of framing the issues have led to confusion and impeded progress.[6] Accordingly, I want to impose some categories that I think better cut at the joints of the phenomena in play. In particular, I want to define two kinds of reductionism – what I will call "source reductionism" and "transmission reductionism." In this system, one can be an "anti-reductionist about testimonial knowledge" either by denying source reductionism or by denying transmission reductionism (or by denying both).

1.2.1 *Knowledge Generation and Source Reductionism*

"Source reductionism" is best understood as a claim about species of knowledge. Specifically, it claims that the genus *Knowledge* has several species – such as *perceptual* knowledge, *inductive* knowledge, and *introspective* knowledge – according to the different ways that knowledge can be generated. It also claims that testimonial knowledge does *not* constitute an additional species alongside these others.[7] Put

[6] See my "Recent Work on Testimonial Knowledge" for further discussion on this point.

[7] By "generative source," I mean simply a source for generating knowledge. It should be noted here that my use of the term "generative source" is different from Lackey's. On her terminology, testimony is a "generative source" just in case it is

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

differently, source reductionism claims that testimonial knowledge can be understood in terms of these other species of knowledge, perhaps as a sub-species of one of the others, or perhaps as involving some combination of the others. Suppose we were to construct a diagram marking the various species of the genus *Knowledge*. According to source reductionism, you don't need a separate species for testimonial knowledge.

Source reductionism, then, divides the genus *Knowledge* into species according to specific ways that knowledge can be generated, and claims that testimonial knowledge can be understood entirely in terms of non-testimonial generative sources. "Source anti-reductionism" denies this by claiming that testimonial knowledge requires its own generative source. Put differently, it claims that testimonial knowledge cannot be understood entirely in terms of non-testimonial generative sources, and this is because testimony is its own kind of generative source (Figure 1.1).

Source reductionism and source anti-reductionism will look somewhat different on different theories of knowledge, according to how they understand the various species in Figure 1.1. For example, evidentialists will think that perceptual knowledge is grounded in perceptual evidence, inductive knowledge is grounded in inductive evidence,

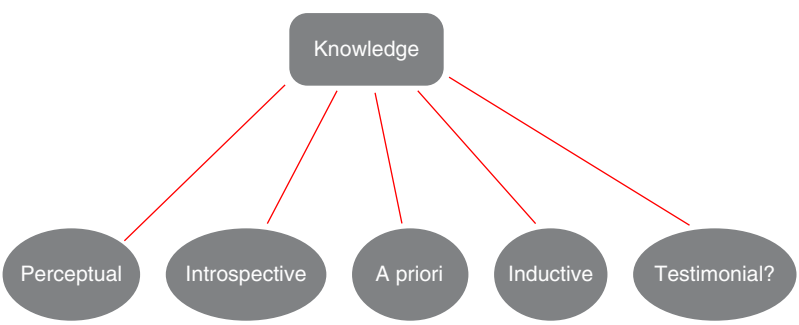

Figure 1.1

possible for a hearer to gain testimonial knowledge from a speaker who does not know. See Jennifer Lackey, "Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission," *Philosophical Quarterly* 49, 197 (1999): 471–490; and *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For further discussion regarding differences in my terminology and Lackey's, see note 9.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-46005-7 — The Transmission of Knowledge
John Greco
Excerpt
More Information

a-priori knowledge is grounded in a-priori evidence, etc. The dispute between source reductionists and source anti-reductionists will then be over whether testimonial knowledge requires its own kind of evidence – that is, whether testimonial evidence is reducible to some other species of evidence. Process reliabilists, on the other hand, will think of our species as specifying different kinds of cognitive processes; perceptual knowledge is generated by reliable perceptual processes, inductive knowledge is generated by reliable inductive reasoning processes, etc. The dispute among process reliabilists, then, will be over whether testimonial knowledge requires a distinctive process, irreducible to the processes already accounted for in the other species. Virtue theorists, of course, will frame the dispute in terms of "testimonial virtues." But whatever their more substantive view about knowledge, source reductionists agree that testimony does not constitute an irreducible generative source of knowledge, alongside other generative sources. Source anti-reductionists agree that it does.

1.2.2 Knowledge Transmission and Transmission Reductionism

Another set of issues that has dominated the contemporary literature on testimony regards the transmission of knowledge. But to my mind, these discussions tend to skirt around the most interesting and important issues in the neighborhood, and at times even obscure the phenomenon that I have been arguing should be the focus of our attention. One problem here, as with the terminology of "reductionism" and "anti-reductionism," is that the term "transmission" is used in various ways in the literature. At times, it is used to mark our target phenomenon. That is, it is used to mark an important and special function of testimony – to transmit knowledge, *as opposed to* generate knowledge, in a community of knowers. On this use of the term, it is assumed that transmission is something special, and it is decried that the phenomenon has been largely off the radar screen of traditional epistemology.[8] At other times, however, the term is used to mark something that is not necessarily interesting at all – it refers simply to coming to know from

[8] For example, see Michael Welbourne, "The Transmission of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 29, 114 (1979): 1–9; "The Community of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* 31, 125 (1981): 302–314; and his *The Community of Knowledge*.

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org