



## *The Transmission of Knowledge*

How do we transmit or distribute knowledge, as distinct from generating or producing it? In this book, John Greco examines the interpersonal relations and social structures that enable and inhibit the sharing of knowledge within and across epistemic communities. Drawing on resources from moral theory, the philosophy of language, action theory, and the cognitive sciences, he considers the role of interpersonal trust in transmitting knowledge, and argues that sharing knowledge involves a kind of shared agency similar to giving a gift or passing a ball. He also explains why transmitting knowledge is easy in some social contexts, such as those involving friendship or caregiving, but impossible in contexts characterized by suspicion and competition rather than by trust and cooperation. His book explores phenomena that have been undertheorized by traditional epistemology, and throws new light on existing problems in social epistemology and the epistemology of testimony.

JOHN GRECO holds the Robert L. McDevitt, K.S.G., K.C.H.S. and Catherine H. McDevitt L.C.H.S Chair in the Department of Philosophy at Georgetown University. His publications include *Putting Sceptics in Their Place: The Nature of Skeptical Arguments and Their Role in Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge, 2000) and *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Cambridge, 2010). He is co-editor (with Christoph Kelp) of *Virtue-Theoretic Epistemology: New Methods and Approaches* (Cambridge, 2020).

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JOHN GRECO

*Georgetown University, Washington, DC*



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## *Preface*

I first began thinking about the epistemology of testimony in the context of an objection to virtue epistemology. Jennifer Lackey, and then others, had put forward a persistent objection to that approach, arguing that it could not adequately account for testimonial knowledge. Moreover, Lackey had formulated the objection so as to target my own version of virtue epistemology specifically. In what sense, she asked, was it appropriate to think of testimonial knowledge as true belief attributable to the virtuous cognitive agency of the hearer rather than that of the speaker? Put in different terms, in what sense could testimonial knowledge be considered an achievement of the hearer rather than the speaker? I recognized that this was an important line of objection, so I turned to the newly burgeoning epistemology of testimony literature to get up to speed. Once I encountered that literature, however, I became interested in the range of issues that it raised in their own right.

At the same time, I had the persistent impression that the contemporary literature on testimony was not cutting matters at the joints. On the contrary, it seemed to me that, at least often, the ways in which the literature framed those issues were distorting, and even preventing progress. This would be understandable enough, given that these discussions were in such early stages. Work by Welbourne, Hardwig, Coady, Fricker, Hinchman, Moran, Faulkner, Lackey, and others was truly groundbreaking, articulating issues and defending positions that had been largely neglected, or not even recognized, by traditional epistemology. Nevertheless, I thought that we could do better – that some of the most important issues that these authors had uncovered, or started to uncover, could be better framed and then better addressed.

One such issue concerned whether testimonial knowledge could be reduced to some other kind of knowledge. This issue was stated clearly enough by Coady, but then quickly clouded by others, who wedded any

number of inessential theses to both the reductionist and anti-reductionist positions. Another intriguing issue was whether, in some interesting and important sense, testimony has the distinctive function of transmitting knowledge rather than generating it. Welbourne seemed to be on to the question in early formulations, but then, once again, subsequent discussion by others seemed to distort the issue, and even to obscure it from view.

Also important in the early literature on testimony, and overlapping with discussions about reduction and transmission, were questions about the nature of the relationship between the speaker and hearer in a testimonial exchange. Focus on this relationship gave rise to a host of further, interesting issues, including the nature and extent of epistemic dependence, the importance of an epistemic division of labor, and the role of trust in testimonial justification and knowledge.

In the background of all of these discussions, and sometimes in the foreground, were questions about the discipline of epistemology itself. Namely, was traditional epistemology adequate to the task of theorizing such issues, or was epistemology as traditionally conceived hopelessly impoverished in this regard. Put differently, was epistemology itself in need of a revolution in order to adequately theorize such phenomena as social epistemic dependence and the epistemic division of labor – issues that were now being recognized as ubiquitous in the sciences and other cognitive domains?

Again, all these issues seemed to me to be clearly important, and theoretically interesting in their own right. This book is the result of my trying to address them. The way that I have done so is to emphasize the big picture rather than to work through my disagreements with other authors in painstaking detail. This is in fact appropriate to the task at hand, for two reasons. First, I am here arguing for a revision of the literature's categories in favor of a new general framework for thinking about testimonial knowledge in general and the transmission of knowledge in particular. That makes close engagement with extant positions difficult, insofar as those positions are framed in terms that I mean to reject. Second, I am here most interested in defending a *general framework* for thinking through the relevant issues, rather than a position that is worked out in fine detail. The reason for this is that I believe (and argue!) that the framework is largely consistent with any number of substantive approaches in social epistemology and in normative epistemology more broadly. My central task, then, is not to

refute other authors, but to defend an approach that better articulates the relevant issues and the possibilities for addressing them. To put things another way, I am here largely concerned to help allies rather than to defeat opponents.

Finally, it has not been lost on me that the theoretical issues treated in this book are of practical importance as well. And in fact, their practical importance has been highlighted by our current social and political situation, characterized as it is by anti-scientism, tribalism, a revolt against expertise, and increasing incivility. In many ways, it seems to me, the current situation can be diagnosed as a disintegration of epistemic communities, attended by increased suspicion and decreasing charity toward any perceived outsider. A salient feature is the ways in which those outside one's own intellectual circles – those with whom one disagrees – are increasingly characterized as morally and/or intellectually flawed. Our only explanation of opinions that diverge from our own is that those who hold them must be either immoral, ignorant, or irrational, or perhaps some combination of these.

And it is precisely here, I believe, that social epistemology can be of practical use. In particular, social epistemology looks to describe the various ways in which the quality of a person's epistemic position depends not just on their individual cognitive resources, but on the good health and proper functioning of a broader epistemic community. Relatedly, social epistemology looks to detail the features of a well-functioning epistemic community, and to thereby understand not only how things go well when they do, but also how things can go wrong. In light of this, a successful social epistemology might be in a better position to diagnose the ills of our current social and political situation, and in a way that sees those who we disagree with through a more complex and more charitable lens. It is my hope that this book makes a contribution to this kind of practical project as well, however indirectly.

## *Acknowledgments*

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Finally, several chapters draw on material from previous publications. I would like to thank the publishers and editors of these for allowing me to use them here. Parts of Chapter 1 draw on material in “What Is Transmission?”, *Episteme* 13, 4 (December 2016): 481–498. Chapter 2 revises material from “Testimonial Knowledge

and the Flow of Information,” in David Henderson and John Greco, eds., *Epistemic Evaluation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Chapters 3 and 5 draw on material from “The Role of Trust in Testimonial Knowledge,” in Katherine Dormandy, ed., *Trust in Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2019); “Knowledge, Virtue and Achievement,” in Heather Battaly, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2019); and “Achievement, Joint Achievement and the Value of Knowledge,” *Journal of Dialectics of Nature* 40, 2 (2018): 1–10. Chapter 6 draws on material from both “Common Knowledge,” *The International Journal for the Study of Scepticism* 6 (2016): 309–325; and “Hinge Epistemology and the Prospects for a Unified Theory of Knowledge,” *Synthese* (2019). Chapter 7 uses material in “Education and the Transmission of Understanding,” *Acta Philosophica II*, 27 (2018): 237–249; and “*Episteme*: Knowledge and Understanding,” in Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd, eds., *Virtues and Their Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Chapter 9 uses material from “Knowledge of God,” W. Abraham and F. Aquino, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); “Testimony and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge,” translated into Russian and published with replies in *Epistemology and Philosophy of Science* 53, 3 (2017): 19–47; “Die Verborgenheit Gottes und die sozialen Dimensionen religiöser Erkenntnis,” (Divine Hiddenness and the Social Dimensions of Religious Knowledge) transl. Liselotte Gierstl, *zur Debatte* 3 (2016): 29–32; “No-Fault Atheism,” in Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds., *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); “Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony,” in Dariusz Lukasiewicz and Roger Pouivet, eds., *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2012); “Religious Knowledge in the Context of Conflicting Testimony,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 82 (2009): 61–76; and “Friendly Theism,” James Kraft, ed., in *Religious Tolerance through Epistemic Humility* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). And finally, the Appendix includes material from “The Transmission of Knowledge and Garbage,” *Synthese* (2019); and “Transmitting Faith (and Garbage),” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, 3 (2018): 85–104.