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Socrates and the Epistemology of Testimony

Abstract: Does the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues have a view about the epistemology of testimony? Despite the apparent anachronism of even asking this question, in this paper I show that there is evidence in our texts that Socrates actually has a quite sophisticated view about the epistemology of testimony. Indeed, as I put the evidence together, I believe that the view of testimony we find in the texts is one that is both defensible and also plausible. I build my argument in stages. l first look at a few passages in which Socrates seems to be extremely skeptical about the value of testimony. I next turn to examples that show his willingness to accept some testimony as justification for belief. I then explain how and why Socrates could distinguish reliable testimony from unreliable kinds. I close with a few observations about how Socrates' responses to testimonial evidence fit into contemporary debates on the epistemology of testimony. I will claim that the best sense of Socrates' position is that he accepted a version of what has come to be known as "holistic coherentism" about the epistemology of testimony.

Keywords: Socrates; Epistemology; Testimony; Holistic Coherence; Justification; Reliability

Introduction

Does the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues have a view about the epistemology of testimony? Despite the apparent anachronism of even asking this question, in this paper I show that there is evidence in our texts that Socrates actually has a quite sophisticated view about the epistemology of testimony. Indeed, as I put the evidence together, I believe that the view of testimony we find in the texts is one that is both defensible and also plausible.

I build my argument in stages. l first look at a few passages—familiar to most scholars—in which Socrates seems to be extremely skeptical about the value of testimony. But I will then turn to examples that seem clearly to show his willingness to accept some testimony as justification for belief, and so, I will claim, Socrates cannot simply be a skeptic about the epistemic value of

testimony. I will then explain how and why reliable testimony can be distinguished from the unreliable kinds: what makes testimony reliable, and how can an epistemic agent discern that it is the reliable kind? I will close with a few observations about how Socrates' responses to testimonial evidence fit into contemporary debates on the epistemology of testimony. I will claim that the best sense of Socrates' position is that he accepted a version of what has come to be known as 'holistic coherentism' about the epistemology of testimony.

II. *Skeptical Responses to Testimony*

In his discussion with Polus in the *Gorgias*, Socrates dismisses Polus's attempt to appeal to what the latter claims nearly everyone would say about the topics they are discussing. As they do in courtrooms, Socrates proclaims, so, too, the kinds of witnesses Polus wants to call into his discussion with Socrates will all give testimony that is worthless when it comes to the truth.

> My wonderful man, you're trying to refute me in oratorical style, the way people in law courts do when they think they're refuting some claim. There, too, one side thinks its refuting the other when it produces many reputable witnesses on behalf of the arguments it presents, while the person who asserts the opposite produces only one witness, or none at all. This 'refutation' is worthless, as far as truth is concerned, for it might happen sometimes that an individual is brought down by the false testimony of many reputable people. Now, too, nearly every Athenian and alien will take your side on the things you're saying, if it's witnesses you want to produce against me to show that what I say isn't true. (*Gorgias* 471e2-472a5)[1]

The discussion with Polus also reveals another reason why Socrates might be seen as regarding testimony as too unreliable to justify belief. The problem, as Socrates puts it so bluntly to a flustered and annoyed Polus, is that the person giving the testimony—in this case Polus—while not actually trying to deceive, might be saying things that even that person does not believe:

[1] All translations from Cooper (1997).

> Socrates: I say, Polus, that both orators and tyrants have the least power in their cities, as I was saying just now. For they do just about nothing they want to do, though they certainly do whatever they see most fit to do.
> Polus: Well, isn't this having great power?
> Socrates: No, at least Polus says it isn't.
> Polus: I say it isn't? I certainly say it is!
> Socrates: By … , you certainly don't! (*Gorgias* 466d6-e6)

Later in the discussion, Socrates claims that everyone—including Polus—considers doing injustice worse than suffering it. Polus again resists:

> Polus: I believe that I don't, and that no other person does, either. So you'd take suffering what's unjust over doing it, would you?
> Socrates: Yes, and so would you and everyone else.
> Polus: Far from it! I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and nobody else would, either. (*Gorgias* 474b6-10)

From passages like these, we might be tempted to conclude that Socrates thought that testimony in general was worthless as evidence or justification, since he thinks that most people actually have no clear idea about what they believe on some issue about which they report their views. Most testimony is worthless because it reflects the opinions of 'those people who easily put men to death and would bring them back to life again if they could, without thinking; I mean the majority of men' (*Crito* 48c5-6).

III. *Reliable and Unreliable Testimony*

Despite the ubiquity of passages in which Socrates scorns common opinions, however, there are other passages in our texts that show he was not entirely dismissive of all testimony. To get a sense of what kind of testimony Socrates would accept as reliable, we may consider what Socrates says to his old friend, Crito, about this issue.

> Socrates: Do you not think it a sound statement that one must not value all opinions of people, but some and not others, nor the opinions of all people, but those of some and not of others? […]
> Crito: It is.

> Socrates: One should value the good opinions, and not the bad ones?
> Crito: Yes.
> Socrates: The good opinions are those of wise people, the bad ones of foolish people?
> Crito: Of course. (*Crito* 47a2-11)

Some testimony, it seems, is quite valuable, epistemically. A fully adequate account of Socrates' view of the epistemic value of testimony, accordingly, must explain not only how the good kind of testimony differs from the bad kinds, but also how an epistemic agent receiving such testimony can tell the difference. Without the ability to distinguish the good from the bad, even the good kind of testimony cannot be a reliable mode of transmission of information, since it seems the reliable kind is nowhere near as ubiquitous as the unreliable kind. Epistemic value can only be obtained if the reliable part of an otherwise unreliable medium is discernable. This, then, is the task that I propose to take up in the following sections of this paper.

IV. *Ethical Ignorance*

In response to the oracle given to Chaerephon, which declared that 'no one is wiser than Socrates', Socrates seeks to understand the oracle's response by questioning others he supposes must surely be wiser than he is, and is shocked to find that none of those he speaks to really are wiser than he is. The closest he gets to finding others wiser than he is are the craftsmen, who really do know things that Socrates does not. Even this advantage, however, does not make them wiser than Socrates because they also suppose that because they are good at their crafts, they also know 'the most important pursuits' (*Apology* 22d7), but actually do not. Socrates is wiser than even the craftsmen, because even though he, too, does not know 'the most important pursuits', he also recognizes that he does not know them, and is thus wiser than those who think they do.

From this general explanation of the oracle, it seems that Socrates is especially skeptical about testimony when it comes to 'the most important pursuits', which seem to be ethical in nature. But it does not follow from this fact that Socrates is skeptical about the epistemic value of testimony more generally.

Given that Socrates actually acknowledges that craftsmen do know their crafts, we have explicit evidence that there are examples of testimony (for example, statements about crafts made by those skilled in them) that Socrates seems quite ready to accept as true and not treat with the same sort of skepticism he shows when it comes to testimony about ethical subjects.

The difference between what craftsmen say about their crafts and what the many say about ethically important issues aligns precisely with what Socrates says to Crito in the passage quoted above (*Crito* 47a2-11) about which opinions deserve credence and which do not: testimony by those with knowledge is worth accepting, whereas testimony from those without knowledge is worthless. It is clear enough in the early dialogues that Socrates believes that anyone who claims to have any significant knowledge in ethical matters is not to be believed, and no claims alleged to derive from such ethical expertise are left unrefuted in the dialogues in which Socrates subjects them to elenctic examination.

From many things that Socrates says in the *Apology*, it is clear that although he is willing to grant to others some level of expertise (for example, craftspeople in regard to their crafts), he regards almost everyone as so ignorant and confused about what he calls 'the most important pursuits' as generally not credible on such subjects. Since the question of whether he should escape from prison involves an ethically significant judgment, Socrates dismisses the testimony of the majority of people in the *Crito* as unworthy of consideration. But this limits the scope of Socrates' skeptical response to testimony to statements about ethical issues[2]. Outside of the domain of ethics, Socrates holds a very different view.

[2] I am not claiming that Socrates was entirely skeptical about all ethical claims. For example, in the *Apology* he famously claims to ***know*** that it is 'wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man' (*Apology* 29b6-7). Scholars have debated how Socrates might suppose he came to have such knowledge, but it need not be supposed that it was through testimony. Moreover, as I will show below, Socrates is not even a global skeptic about ethical testimony, even some given by non-experts (under special circumstances).

V. *Testimony and Matters of Fact: The Primacy of Craft-Knowledge*

In contemporary studies of the epistemology of testimony, the model of knowledge is always propositional or informational knowledge: knowledge ***that*** such-and-such is the case. As I have recently argued at length[3], this is not the model of knowledge that was Socrates' main focus[4], Instead, Socrates was much more interested in the kind of knowledge constituted by expertise, know-how, or craft: *technê*. Socrates at least compares the kind of knowledge that he is interested in—the kind that counts as wisdom and constitutes virtue—to craft; this is his so-called 'craft-analogy', and scholars disagree as to whether he really intends it to be only an analogy, or whether Socrates thinks of virtue as a kind of craft, perhaps the most important kind of all. At the very least, the 'craft-analogy' assures that the kind of knowledge Socrates is interested in is a kind that can be achieved in degrees, and this is not typically what people think about propositional or informational knowledge[5]: when it comes to knowing ***facts***, we suppose that either one has such knowledge or one does not. Some of the necessary conditions of knowledge may be gradable: justification, reliability, and perhaps even belief. But knowledge itself is not taken to be gradable, but is regarded, instead, as a threshold condition. One has either met the conditions of knowledge, or not met them.

The question I wish to raise now, however, takes us away from the kind of knowledge that Socrates thinks would constitute wisdom or virtue, and concerns instead the kinds of cognitive conditions we might achieve with respect to matters of fact. Given his focus on craft-knowledge, the evidence of Socrates' views on testimony regarding factive conditions is more difficult to find in our texts, but what is there also shows a clear distinction between factual

[3] In Smith (2021).

[4] I understand that this contention is controversial. Compare, for example, Gail Fine, who insists that the kind of knowledge that Socrates is interested in is 'a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief' (Fine 2008: 53).

[5] The claim that even propositional knowledge might come in degrees has been proposed by contextualists, but as far as I know, no one has supposed that we should understand Socrates' epistemology as a kind of contextualism.

claims intended to persuade others of some ethically significant view, and those without specific ethical implications. When Socrates talks about persuasive speech—whether in forensic contexts or in political settings more broadly—we find him giving the same skeptical responses as we found in testimony that is directly about ethical evaluation. So, in the *Apology*, for example, Socrates insists that he must try to defend himself 'against the first lying accusations made against me and my first accusers, and then against the later accusations and the later accusers' (*Apology* 18a8-b1). Socrates insists to his jurors that he will tell them only the truth (17b8), but he also makes clear that in being committed to telling only the truth, he marks himself off as a relative 'stranger to the manner of speaking here' in the courtroom (17d4), where those giving the testimony tell their lies in 'embroidered and stylized phrases' to add to its persuasive appeal (17c1-2). Ironically, jurors in courtrooms are required to judge the truth of testimony. Socrates seems to think that there is relatively little truth to be heard in testimony given in legal cases. As we saw in the quotations I gave at the beginning of this paper, Socrates also seems to think that this same flaw infects persuasive speech more broadly, and especially in the domain of politics. The problem seems to be, in cases where judgments of value and particularly justice are concerned, even testimony that is repeated and affirmed by great numbers of witnesses is often false.

Socratic conversations often become focused on the giving of definitions, and scholars have seen the pursuit of definitions in the texts to be such a prominent feature of so many of them as to argue that it is really this sort of knowledge—definitional knowledge—that Socrates regards as constitutive of wisdom[6]. I have recently argued that Socrates' interest in trying to get his interlocutors to give definitions of the terms under debate should not be understood as his main philosophical aim[7]. But however this debate may come out, the texts do not show that Socrates is skeptical about all definitional claims, but only those made about ethically significant terms. Not a single instance can be found in our texts in which Socrates agrees to a proposed definition of some

[6] See, for example, Benson (2000).

[7] Smith (2021).

virtue-term, for example—and not just those, but also other ethically significant terms (such as 'friendship' in *Lysis*). But in a couple of places, where Socrates is explaining to an interlocutor the sort of thing he is asking for them to provide, he shows that he readily accepts some definitions, only the ones he gives are of non-ethical terms, for example at *Laches* 192a9–b3 on quickness, and *Meno* 76a4–7 on shape.

It is not clear, however, whether Socrates' willingness to accept non-ethical definitions is based on testimony, though perhaps testimony might have played some role in his acquiring the information provided in such definitions. But on another issue which directly requires understanding the meanings of words, Socrates seems to recognize a reliable role for testimony. In dialogues that concern the question of the teachability of virtue, Socrates' interlocutors sometimes compare the teaching and learning of virtue to the teaching and learning of Greek (see *Protagoras* 327e3–a1; *Alcibiades* I 111a1). All of us learn to speak our native languages (and any subsequent languages that we may learn) through teaching that qualifies as testimony: parents and teachers tell us what words to use and explain their meanings to us, and by accepting and practicing what they tell us, we become increasingly proficient. In this way, learning language is a model of learning a skill, and so is directly pertinent to the kind of knowledge that I claim is Socrates' primary focus. But this skill also plainly involves a great deal of factive cognitive achievement, as well. Such factive conditions, it seems plain, are achieved by the transmission of information via testimony. Accordingly, language-learning seems to provide an excellent example of the epistemology of testimony that Socrates regards as reliable and effective. He cannot, therefore, be a complete skeptic about cognitive achievement via testimony. On the other hand, although he does not at all object to the claim that language can be taught and learned in this way, he rejects the applicability of language-learning to the teaching and learning of virtue. Precisely because there are many who have great skill in Greek and can teach it to others, there is no problem with supposing that this is a skill that can be taught and learned (via testimony). But Socrates insists that there is a problem with teaching and learning virtue, since no experts in that skill can be found (*Protagoras* 319a10-320b5). And the best evidence that virtue is not taught or

learned, or at least not in the same way that language is taught and learned, is that people generally don't disagree about which words refer to which objects or other facts about proper Greek language-use. But people very much disagree about 'just and unjust people and actions' (*Alcibiades* I. 111e11-112a3), which proves that those who disagree do not share knowledge about the subject (*Alcibiades* I. 111b6-8, 112c8-d3). Those who can teach something must first know it themselves (*Alcibiades* I. 111a11-b2), and people who share knowledge about something won't disagree about what they know (*Alcibiades* I. 111b3-5).

So testimony, to be reliable, must have its basis in expertise in the subject matter. Given that Socrates finds no significant expertise in ethical matters, he is skeptical of testimony related to ethical evaluation. On the other hand, as I had noted earlier, Socrates shows a significant willingness to accept the testimony of those who have demonstrable expertise in some subject-area, and the clearest example of this would be when experts in crafts give testimony about their crafts. This same openness to testimony appears when Socrates talks about factive claims in regard to speaking Greek. Those who have demonstrable expertise in speaking Greek may give testimony about the meanings of Greek words and such that Socrates would find reliable and useful.

The principle that Socrates seems to follow, then, is one that puts heavy emphasis, when it comes to factive testimony, on whether or not the one giving it has the kind of expertise that assures the reliability of the testimony. I consider subsequently just what this principle tells us about where Socrates would fit into contemporary debates about testimony, but before I do that, two further points are worth making.

The first of these concerns the relative ubiquity and undemandingness of the achievements that Socrates' basic principle about the primacy of expertise requires. To give just a sense of just how easy it is to have at least some skill that would convey to the one who had it relative trustworthiness as a giver of testimony, consider the discussion between Socrates and Callicles about the kind of skill necessary to preserve one's life, in the *Gorgias*.

> Socrates: Well, my excellent fellow, do you think that expertise (*epistēmē*) in swimming is a grand thing?
> Callicles: No, by Zeus, I don't.

> Socrates: But it certainly does save people from death whenever they fall into a situation that requires this expertise. (*Gorgias* 511c4-9)

That swimming—at a level of expertise that only requires being able to avoid drowning—counts as the kind of knowledge that would make one a credible expert, allows us to see just how widely available Socrates thinks the epistemic requirement is for one to qualify to give expert testimony. In addition to swimming and language mastery, accordingly, we can confidently add any number of ordinary skills whose possessors can and should be trusted when they talk about what they know.

Expertise might be ubiquitous, however—as Socrates seems to think that it is—but not shared by everyone, and it could still be that Socrates would hold that those who lack a given expertise would not be in any position to judge the value of testimony given by someone alleged to be a credible expert. This, too, would be a significant obstacle to the transmission of factive cognition via testimony. But our texts also do not present this as a problem; non-experts can, in many cases, judge the expertise of those said to have it—even when the non-expert doing the judging does not have that expertise. For this, a different kind of expertise is needed—the knowledge by which to judge putative experts in some area—but this knowledge may be had without having the expertise under judgment.

Texts that allow this kind of judgmental ability in regard to the specific expertise of others refer both to negative indicators of expertise, and also to positive indicators. Example of negative indicators of expertise are more common in the texts, and, again, are sufficiently familiar to readers of Plato not to need much citation. One such text, to give readers a reminder of this kind of negative judgmental expertise, may be found soon after the one just quoted about the expertise of swimming. The text is especially noteworthy for my project herein, because it actually begins with doubt being expressed about testimony, which is then followed by an example of something that Socrates claims to 'know clearly'. Socrates begins by reporting something he has heard said about Pericles.

> Socrates: […] I hear, anyhow, that Pericles made the Athenians idle and cowardly, chatterers and money-grubbers, since he was the first to institute wages for them.
> Callicles: The people you hear say this are brain-damaged[8], Socrates.
> Socrates: Here, though, is something I'm not just hearing, but do know clearly, and so do you—that at first Pericles had a good reputation, and when they were worse, the Athenians never voted to convict him in any shameful deposition. But after he turned them into 'admirable and good' people, near the end of his life, they voted to convict Pericles of embezzlement and came close to condemning him to death, because they thought he was a wicked man, obviously.
> Callicles: Well? Did that make Pericles a bad man?
> Socrates: A man like that who cared for donkeys or horses or cattle would at least look bad if he showed these animals kicking, butting, and biting him because of their wildness, when they had been doing none of these things when he took them over. Or don't you think that a caretaker of any animal is a bad one who will show his animals to be wilder when he took them over, when they were gentler? (*Gorgias* 515e4-516b2, translation slightly modified)

In this passage we find two of the features of what Socrates thinks about the epistemology of testimony and what can be known by non-experts. Here, it is Callicles who is skeptical about value judgments reported via testimony, and note that Socrates does not simply grant the testimony he reports having heard. Instead, Socrates provides additional evidence—evidence that he claims to 'know clearly' and says Callicles also knows—for thinking that Pericles was no expert when it came to politics. Just as one who is not an expert in caring for animals can judge that such an expert would not make the animals in her care wilder and more unruly than they were before she cared for them, so, too, judges Socrates, an expert politician would not lead those governed into less, rather than greater, civility. Socrates later claims to be the only one among his contemporaries to have taken up the 'true political craft', on the ground that he alone always speaks in such a way as to aim at what is best, rather than at simply gratifying those to whom he speaks (*Gorgias* 521d6-e1). So by this measure, as

[8] The translation given for this word in Cooper (1997) says 'have cauliflower ears'; the literal meaning of the phrase—sometimes applied to boxers—is 'broken-headed'. I see no reason to think that Callicles means to single out athletes in using the expression here, however. On the other hand, Callicles probably uses this expression to characterize the kinds of people who admire the physical culture of the Spartans and thus regard Pericles as taking Athens in the wrong direction.

well, a non-expert can judge the expertise of a politician—at least in cases where the actual aims of the politician can be recognized.

The feature of craft-knowledge that allows non-experts to appraise the expertise of practitioners is that crafts produce specific products or results. In at least some cases—the productive crafts—the products are ones that those using them might not be able to produce themselves, but are things that many people know well how to use[9]. One does not need to be an expert shoe-maker to know when a pair of shoes chafes and doesn't fit, nor does one need to be a skilled physician to know that one's illness has continued despite treatments received. In the case of ill-fitting shoes, we might well blame the shoe-maker who made them for incompetence or sloppiness of workmanship. In the case of treatments that don't seem to be working, we may simply assume the physician is doing her best, but has not yet figured out the best treatment for the problem. So we do not always and in every instance require perfection from craftspeople: our judgments of their performances are balanced by at least some degree of understanding the limitations of expertise in a given area. But even given this contextualization of judgment, non-experts may be in quite secure positions when it comes to judging the reliability of some putative expert.

Given enough experience in the world, accordingly, a non-expert might be in a very good position to judge the reliability of testimony, according to Socrates, provided that the non-expert has sufficient experience with the products of some craft. Obviously, however, this does not apply to situations in which someone is inexperienced with the products of some craft: one who did not know how to play the flute would be in no position to judge whether some

[9] Plato has Socrates discuss the proper use of tools by craftspeople who need such tools in the *Euthydemus* 280b7-281a6, but does not extend this discussion of expert use to non-craftspeople. The kind of example I discuss here is brought out in *Republic* X (601c11-d2), where Socrates talks about the different skills of makers of things and users of those things: 'a user of each thing has the most experience of it and he can tell a maker which of his products performs well or badly in actual use' (601d8-10). Plato goes on to give the example of an expert flautist advising a flute-maker (601d10-e2). This same distinction also appears at *Cratylus* 388c and following. By noting several instances of where this distinction appears in Plato, I am not claiming that he is making the same point in each case, or even that Plato's use of the distinction must always be interpreted in the same way.

specific flute was well or poorly made. But even in this kind of case, such a judgment could be made with justification by one who receives the testimony of an expert flautist. If I overhear James Galway praising the quality of some flute, I have excellent reason to think that the flute he has praised is, indeed, an excellent one. Nothing in what Socrates says about testimony blocks this sort of case, which shows that one need not be either an expert in the making of a certain object, nor in its use (as would be the case of me with respect to flutes), in order to judge the quality of a given object. The testimony of a recognizably reliable source will suffice at least for some level of justification.

This last case, notice, shows that testimony alone can convey information reliably and can confer justification. All that is needed for testimony to function in this way is some basis for thinking that the one giving the testimony has relevant expertise. The examples I have given above show that such relevant expertise can come in different forms. But what can one do if one has no basis for judging whether the one giving the testimony has relevant expertise?

VI. *Reliable Testimony from Unreliable Witnesses*

So far, I have tried to put together a picture of how Socrates would have accepted testimony as a source of information and justification, and have focused on cases in which the one giving testimony can be reliably recognized as a qualified expert. The position for which I have assembled evidence so far is by itself enough to show that Socrates was not a skeptic about testimony—at least with respect to testimony about factual issues. Requiring that the one giving testimony have the relevant expertise might seem like a very high standard, but I have also argued that Socrates readily accepted that all kinds of expertise—of the sort that would sustain reliable testimony—were available to human beings, as was the ability to discern who might be qualified to give reliable testimony on a given subject.

But now another feature of Socrates' view of testimony deserves to be recognized, one that allows non-experts to establish reliable testimony even from those who are generally unreliable sources. At the close of his discussion

about doing and suffering injustice with Polus in the *Gorgias*, for example, he makes an important distinction:

> Socrates: So you see, Polus, that when one refutation is compared with the other, there is no resemblance at all. Whereas everyone but me agrees with you, you are all I need, although you are just a party of one, for your testimony and agreement. It's you alone whom I call upon for a vote: the others, I disregard. (*Gorgias* 475e7-476a2)

The entire significance of this passage requires some interpretation, but at least on the face of it, Socrates is not simply dismissing all testimony as failing to bear evidential weight. Instead, he is contrasting a kind that does not bear weight with a kind that does. Polus had been calling in testimony of the former kind; Socrates claims to have produced testimony of the latter kind.

What is especially significant about this passage, however, is that it reveals that Socrates is actually prepared to recognize not only that there can be reliable testimony given by otherwise unreliable sources, but that even on matters of ethical import, this kind of testimony will bear evidential weight.

So first, note that the one whose testimony Socrates says he will accept in this instance is Polus, who in the rest of the discussion is obviously revealed as a most unreliable source—even with respect to what his own actual opinions are. But Socrates says here that he is willing to accept what Polus says and not disregard what he says (or how he 'votes' on a subject), in the way that he would disregard everyone else. Moreover, in is also plain that the topic under discussion in this passage is one of considerable ethical significance: whether it is preferable and better to suffer or to do injustice.

Socrates has also made clear in the discussion leading to this conclusion just what it is about the discussion itself that has 'converted' Polus from an unreliable witness to a reliable one: what Polus had said prior to elenctic examination by Socrates was as worthless as the testimony of all those Polus wanted to call as witnesses; but what Polus says in response to Socrates' careful elenctic scrutiny proves to be worthy of Socrates' regard. This is a most important result, because it also shows that Socrates is not, after all, a complete skeptic about testimony *even in the moral realm*. Socrates is famous for saying

that 'the unexamined life is not worth living for human beings' (*Apology* 38a5-6[10]). Given what he says to Polus in the passage just quoted, we can now recognize one very important reason for why he thinks this is true. In assessing the testimony of people speaking about matters of ethical significance generally, we find that Socrates regards what they say with complete epistemic disregard: he pays all of it no attention and counts it all as worthless. But, as he shows here with Polus, what someone might say when under examination of the right kind will not be worthless, but will be worth even Socrates' attention.

Scholars have debated whether Socrates' questioning should be seen as generating positive outcomes—that is, conclusions Socrates and his interlocutors (and perhaps also Plato's readers) would be justified in believing—or whether all it produces would be demonstrations of ignorance and *aporia* (perplexity)[11]. While this is not the place to try to resolve this famous debate, it is worth noticing that the conversion of Polus from an unreliable to a reliable witness certainly qualifies as constructive progress, and not just in terms of Polus as an epistemic agent, but also in terms of what he testifies under examination: Socrates indicates that he can now rely on Polus and also trust what Polus says. It is enough herein, however, simply to note that this form of testimony, under these specific conditions, can produce reliable testimony even from otherwise unreliable sources. It is not that somehow Polus has himself become a more reliable witness generally. Rather, it is his role in the form of inquiry in which he engages with Socrates that makes this specific instance of his testimony reliable in a way that merits Socrates' trust[12]. Obviously, neither

[10] Translation slightly modified, since the Greek does not specify a specific gender.

[11] This is the debate between so-called constructivists about the Socratic *elenchus* and anti-constructivists. For good examples of constructivist readings, see especially Vlastos (1983); Santana (2007, 2009); Brickhouse and Smith (1994); for good examples of anti-constructivist readings, see Benson (1987, 1990, 1995, 2002); Adams (1998). A comprehensive review of the entire literature on this issue may be found in Wolfsdorf (2013).

[12] I have argued elsewhere that this form of inquiry tends to bring people to a position where they find themselves agreeing to things that they would not earlier have professed to believe, and which are, indeed, as Socrates insists at 474b9-10, what *everyone* actually believes (which, I assume, Socrates thinks could be established simply by subjecting them to the same kind of inquiry). For details, see Brickhouse and Smith (1994, sections 3.2-3.3).

this nor any other kind of testimony cannot be trusted if there is reason to suppose the one giving the testimony is being dishonest or deceptive. But when his interlocutors obey what is often called the 'doxastic constraint' of elenctic inquiry (Socrates' requirement that his interlocutors only answer by giving their actual opinions)[13], this potential problem does not arise.

VII. *Socrates and Current Debates about Testimony*

Current debates about the epistemology of testimony mostly focus on how or whether testimony can support knowledge—that is, how it can be that one can come to know that $\boldsymbol{p}$ on the basis of testimony that one has received to the effect that $\boldsymbol{p}$. On the one hand, it would be difficult to overestimate just how much information each of us gains through testimony—so much so that to claim that nothing gained that way can count as knowledge seems likely to result in vastly less knowledge than we might suppose we have.

In the contemporary literature on the epistemology of testimony, two approaches have been widely discussed, and one other has seen support from at least a few theorists. The two dominant approaches may be seen as simple opposites: reductionism and anti-reductionism. Reductionist accounts do not see testimony by itself as ever providing justification (and thus cannot support knowledge); instead, beliefs that arise from testimony are justified only if there is evidence from a distinct and more reliable source (such as perception) that the testimony is reliable[14]. Anti-reductionist accounts take a dogmatist stance when it comes to testimony: the receipt of testimony that $\boldsymbol{p}$ is at least *prima facie* justification for believing that $\boldsymbol{p}$ is true. Only if one has some independent reason to doubt that $\boldsymbol{p}$ is true, or to think that the one giving the testimony is unreliable, is this justification neutralized[15]. In this view, testimony is no different

[13] See, for example Benson (2002: 105).

[14] Good examples of reductionist accounts of the epistemic value of testimony may be found in Adler (1994); Fricker (1994); and Lyons (1997).

[15] Good examples of the anti-reductionist approach may be found in Coady (1992); Burge (1997); Foley (1994); and Audi (2002).

from any other source of information, each of which confers (at least) *prima facie* justification for belief[16].

From the various passages discussed above, it seems implausible to think that Socrates would qualify as an anti-reductionist about testimony. His dismissive attitude towards what anyone—or even everyone—else might say about whether doing or suffering injustice is worse, in his discussion with Polus in the *Gorgias*, seems too strong for this approach. Socrates seems to think that a great deal of testimony has no epistemic value at all. Moreover, what he says to *Crito* in the passage I quoted above in section III seems to indicate that testimony by those who lack wisdom provides no reason for belief. On the other hand, it may be that Socrates' position is no more resistant to the epistemic merits of testimony than anti-reductionist accounts require, on the ground that Socrates' dismissive responses to so much testimony may be grounded in his having some independent reason for thinking that those giving the testimony are unreliable. Socrates may be understood as being more skeptical about the reliability of most people when it comes to the testimony they provide, than he is about testimony as a medium for the transfer of information. What seems critical to how his views might compare to those of anti-reductionists is whether Socrates' very negative views about the ethical wisdom of most people can comfortably fit within the otherwise dogmatist approach anti-reductionists take towards the medium of testimony itself. I am inclined to think that the medium cannot be counted as 'innocent unless proven guilty' if most examples of the medium end up being discredited by some trumping standard. But I leave it to others to consider if perhaps Socrates' views fit better with anti-reductionism than I am inclined to think they do.

Given that Socrates clearly accepts that there is some trumping standard—which, in his view, as we have seen, is the standard of expertise or craft-knowledge—we might thus be inclined to place him among reductionists with respect to testimony. Here, too, however, the fit between Socrates' view and this contemporary approach is questionable. The problem in this case is that

[16] I say 'at least' in order to set aside controversies about what may be exceptions to this rule, such as (for one example) *a priori* sources.

Socrates cannot be rightly said to think that the epistemic value of testimony can be *reduced* to the epistemic value of some other information source (in this case, putatively, that of demonstrable expertise) because of the last passage I discussed from our tests, above, where Socrates showed that he was prepared to accept testimony from a non-expert, so long as the testimony was given as a result of elenctic examination. Only if we count the practice of elenctic examination as an example of expertise would this example fit the reductionist requirement, but this approach to the Socratic *elenchus* is controversial—even if only my own testimony on the subject is brought into play![17] But even if we allow this, it seems that Socrates does not require independent confirmation of each instance of testimony in the way the reductionist approach demands. Instead, once one observes some relevant expertise (or wields it oneself), then individual items of testimony do not seem to require separate confirmation.

I have argued that there are at least two ways in which Socrates allows testimony to qualify as bearing evidential weight: one would be in cases in which the giver of testimony has relevant expertise, and the recipient also has the kind of expertise that is required to assess the expertise of the giver of the testimony. The other way in which Socrates will accept testimony is when it is offered as a response to elenctic examination (not as a premise, but as a conclusion of such examination). These two modes may be put into epistemic maxims:

> **M1**: Testimony given by experts in their fields of expertise will justify belief by those receiving such testimony when and only when the recipient is in a position to recognize the relevant expertise of the one giving testimony.
>
> **M2**: Testimony given by those who give it in response to conclusions reached as a result of elenctic examination may justify belief for those who receive[18] such testimony.

[17] In Brickhouse/Smith (1994: 5-8), I argued that the *elenchus* does not amount to a kind of craft. More recently, I have acknowledged that Socrates did seem to think of himself as engaging in a craft (albeit one that is incompletely realized; see Smith 2021: 21-35).

[18] As I said above, those I include as such recipients may also include the ones giving the testimony, by (however reluctantly!) observing themselves giving such testimony, and others who merely observe the testimony being given without taking direct part in the elenctic examination that produces it.

If the acceptances of M1 and M2 are included in one's background system of beliefs, then individual examples of testimony can convey information in a way that will yield justified belief. This way of framing the constraints Socrates puts on testimony invites a third way to position Socrates' view in contemporary debates.

I have elsewhere argued that one way to see the important differences between the various approaches to testimony by contemporary epistemologists is through the lens of what has been called 'the problem of the criterion'[19]. This problem, applied to the issue of testimony, can be represented as follows:

1. Testimony can produce justified beliefs for us only if we are justified in believing that testimony is reliable.
2. We can be justified in thinking that testimony is reliable only if we have justified beliefs that derive from testimony, which provide support for this conclusion.
3. Either (i) we must have justification for thinking that testimony is reliable prior to gaining justification for the beliefs we derive from testimony, or (ii) we must have justification for the beliefs we derive from prior to gaining justification for thinking that beliefs we derive from testimony are reliable.
4. By 2, (i) cannot be the case.
5. By 1, (ii) cannot be the case.
6. Hence, testimony cannot produce justified beliefs[20].

Reductionists with regard to testimony reject premise 2. Anti-reductionists reject premise 1. But another approach that has been argued, for all sources of information and justification, including testimony, rejects premise 3[21]. This

[19] In Smith (2019).

[20] Smith (2019: 161).

[21] For examples of this general approach, see Lehrer (2000); Cohen (2002); and Evans/Smith (2012: 86-106). For examples of this approach directly applied to the epistemology of testimony, see Lehrer (2006); Evans/Smith (2012: 104); and Smith (2019).

approach, known in the literature as holistic coherentism, rejects that the justification for accepting testimony must come either before or after one comes to possess justified individual beliefs that are based on testimony. Instead, justification is something that is possessed by a cognitive system (or sub-system)[22], such that its achievement will also confer justification on one's beliefs about the reliability of an information source and also the trustworthiness of specific beliefs that derive from that source, *all at once*. Justification of some candidate for belief, to put it somewhat differently, will derive from whether or not the candidate fits into the justified cognitive system in the right sort of way[23].

If we understand Socrates' view of testimony in this way, we should suppose that Socrates would count the reception of some testimony from an expert that the recipient is able to recognize as an expert in the relevant field as something that the recipient is justified in believing. But in the same moment, the receipt of that testimony will itself reinforce one's antecedent belief in M1, so that the appropriate justificatory 'fit' for each of them is achieved reciprocally and at the same moment[24]. Similarly, upon the acceptance of some new belief that derives

[22] The condition in the parentheses here is intended to accommodate that there may be coherent sub-systems of non-coherent larger cognitive systems, such that the sub-systems may qualify as justified even if the entire system as a whole may not be. An example to use for this might be the sub-system of medical beliefs held by a well-educated physician. The physician may also have other non-medical beliefs that are unjustified. As long as these other beliefs are epistemically independent of the physician's medical beliefs, their lack of justification will not infect the sub-system of medical beliefs.

[23] Exactly how this 'right sort of way' must be construed is obviously not an appropriate topic for my project herein, but the basic idea of 'fit' here applies both to the receiving of evidential support from other beliefs within the relevant cognitive system and to the conferring of evidential support to the other beliefs already within that system. Since this notion of 'fitting' is not linear, holistic coherentism is not open to the circularity objection that is sometimes made against coherence theories of justification (for example, in Klein 1999). See Evans/Smith (2012), who actually claim that this objection against coherence theory actually does not apply to *any* of the coherence theories that have actually been proposed by epistemologists (Evans/Smith 2012: 81).

[24] Presumably, the belief in M1 was already justified—already a 'fit' in the relevant cognitive system (or sub-system). My claim is that with the addition of one further justified belief from testimony, this 'fit' is further secured and confirmed in the same moment as the belief that M1 serves to justify the new belief. His, according to holistic coherentists, is how justified cognitive systems work.

from an elenctic examination, Socrates' own cognitive system would recognize that accepting the new belief was justified while the support for accepting M2 would also be strengthened and confirmed within that system. Importantly, justification, in this picture, is neither a matter of inference from prior belief(s) (per reductionism), nor a default condition (per anti-reductionism), but rather a matter of coherence within an existing cognitive system (or sub-system). I said above that in order to gain justification from either of the kinds of testimony that Socrates regards as epistemically valuable, the recipient must already believe the relevant maxim (M1 or M2). This shows, accordingly, that there is thus no formal difference between when testimony from a recognized expert or from an interlocutor at the conclusion of an elenctic examination generates justification, and any other instance in which testimony achieves the right kind of 'fit' into an existing cognitive system. So while M1 and M2 are important to Socrates' view of the epistemology of testimony, they function entirely within his overall holistic coherence view of justification.

In the *Crito*, Socrates says of himself, 'I am the kind of man who listens only to the reason that on reflection seems best to me' (46b4-6). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates contrasts his own cognitive condition with what he sees in Callicles': Socrates proclaims that he believes what philosophy says, and 'what philosophy says always stays the same' (482a7-b1) whereas unless and until Callicles also follows philosophy, 'Callicles will not agree with you, Callicles, but will be dissonant with you all your life long' (482b5-6). These statements, I contend, are the kinds of things that a holistic coherentist might say about his own epistemic processing (and also that of those who do not seem to be functioning properly as epistemic agents). When presented with a new candidate for belief (in this case, 'I should allow Crito to help me escape from jail' or 'it is better to do than to suffer injustice'), the virtuous epistemic agent checks the new candidate's justificatory 'fit' against one's existing background system of beliefs. If it fits, the virtuous epistemic agent should accept it and will be justified in doing so; if it does not fit, he or she must either reject the new candidate or create a better fit in his or her background system that includes it by jettisoning one or more other beliefs that do not create as coherent a system as this one will, once adjustments to the system have been made. Obviously, what determines which of these

responses is best will not be determined by testimony, but by the various factors that sustain the cognitive system more generally (and which might be accounted for differently in different specific theories of coherence). Given the reasons I gave earlier for thinking that Socrates' position did not seem smoothly conformable to either reductionist or anti-reductionist approaches to testimony, I submit that the best way to conceive of Socrates' position, in contemporary terms, is as an example of holistic coherentism with respect to the justification of beliefs acquired via testimony.

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