

Safe Testimonial Belief and the Transmission of Justification

Stephen Wright

University of Sheffield

Testimonial Belief

- Lots of our knowledge is *social* in a distinctive way— we learn it from what other people say.
- Sometimes we can come to know things by *taking a speaker's word for it*.
- This is distinct from *treating a speaker's statement as evidence*.

Safety



- Safety is a property of beliefs.
- How safe a belief is depends on how easily you could have gone wrong— not believed it.
- Safety (or something like it) is widely taken to be a necessary condition on knowledge.

The Epistemology of Testimony

- A theory of testimony needs to explain why testimonial beliefs can count as knowledge.
- It owes us an account of *what it is* that supports these beliefs.
- Call this claim an account of the *nature of testimonial justification*.

Transmission



- Transmission theories hold that a listener acquires a speaker's justification.
- A listener thus cannot acquire testimonial justification from a speaker who lacks justification.
- A listener's testimonial justification also cannot outstrip a speaker's justification.

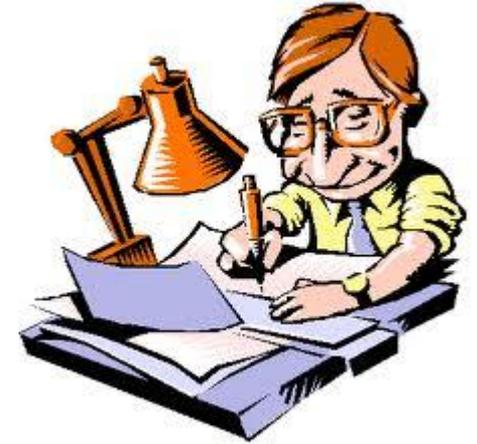
Why Transmission Theories

- Suppose I take your word for it that things are as you say they are.
- If someone asks me why I believe what I do, it seems I can simply *pass the epistemic buck* to you.
- In this way, it seems like your reasons for belief defend my belief.

Safety Problems

- FRANK: A speaker's belief is unsafe, since it could easily have gone wrong, but the listener's belief is rendered safe by the presence of a bystander.
- RANDY: A speaker's belief is unsafe— the product of paranoia, but the listener's own resources render the belief safe.

FRANK



- The listener acquires knowledge.
- This is because of the author – a third party
- The speaker's belief is not safe.
- So transmission theories must be wrong!

A Transmission Response

- Transmission theories won't deny that the listener acquires knowledge.
- They will argue that the listener's justification is entirely testimonial.
- They'll argue that the listener's justification is testimonial-plus-non-testimonial factors.

RANDY



- The listener acquires knowledge.
- The speaker's belief is not safe.
- There are no external third parties.
- So transmission theories must be wrong!

Transmission Again

- There are no bystanders, but this doesn't mean that all justification is testimonial.
- It seems like the explanation of safety comes from the listener – cf. Andy.
- So transmission theories can still make sense of this.

Pelling's Rejoinder

- Pelling sees this response coming – he argues that the justification must be testimonial.
- The content of the listener's belief matches the statement.
- He states that the case is explicitly one where the listener believes the speaker.

A Final Transmission Point

- So the listener's belief is testimonial.
- Transmission theorists might deny this means that the listener's justification is testimonial.
- Either the listener's justification is non-testimonial, or she lacks it entirely.

A Unified Strategy?

- In both cases, testimonial justification involves transmission.
- In both cases a testimonial belief can be justified by non-testimonial factors.
- The result is that there is a coherent strategy for transmission theorists.

Conclusion

- Transmission theories are viable.
- We need to be careful how we articulate them though.
- Testimonial justification, for transmission theories, is not merely “the justification supporting testimonial belief.”