

Roger Pouivet

Reid on Testimony, and Virtue Epistemology

Reid thought that testimony possesses positive epistemic value. Epistemic autonomy is not necessarily the royal road to truth; nor is credulity a systematic epistemic fault and—indeed, it can be an intellectual virtue. Even though the notion of epistemic virtue does not explicitly appear in Reid’s epistemology, it seems inherent to his views that what will give a heteronomous agent exercising the social operations of the mind the best chance to acquire and develop true beliefs is the epistemic virtues that permit her to recognize reliable authorities. This is why it seems to me possible to associate Reid with to the virtue epistemology tradition.

Reid defended the “principle of credulity” and the epistemic value of testimony¹. My question here is simply whether he was right. Should we really believe something on the basis of what someone tells us? Reid’s views about credulity are more plausible if viewed from the perspective of virtue epistemology than from the perspectives of deontological or reliabilist models. The question of whom to believe is, I maintain, best confronted on the basis of a virtue epistemology model.

The first part of the present paper explains why one can accept Reid’s principle of credulity. The second part argues that a certain account of virtue epistemology fits well with this principle. The third part proposes a parallel between virtue epistemology and what Reid presents as the social operations of the mind.

1. Even if reliance upon testimony is a psychological fact, is testimony a legitimate source of knowledge? Will belief grounded in testimony not constitute a kind of epistemological handicap? Is it true that:

(1) If A believes for good reasons that B believes for good reasons that p , then A believes for good reasons that p ?

It might be objected that if A believes for good reasons that B believes for good reasons that p , then A must possess the same reasons as B for believing that p . It

1 See N. Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, chap. VII: The Epistemology of Testimony; J. Van Cleve (2006), “Reid on the Credit of Human Testimony”, in J. Lackey & E. Sosa, *The Epistemology of Testimony*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

is only on the basis of these reasons that A legitimately believes that p , and not on the basis of reasons for believing that B has reasons for believing that p . If A does not know the reasons for which B believes that p , then she cannot believe for good reasons that B believes for good reasons that p .

However, one can distinguish *evidence that p* is true from *good reasons for believing that p* . We would often be unable to be sure that p is true if we had no good reasons for believing that someone had good reasons for believing that p . Reid gives this example:

Suppose a mathematician has made a discovery in that science which he thinks important; that he has put his demonstration in just order; and, after examining it with an attentive eye, has found no flaw in it; I would ask, will there not be still in his breast some dissidence, some jealousy least the ardour of invention may have made him overlook some false step? This must be granted.

He commits his demonstration to the examination of a mathematician friend, whom he esteems a competent judge, and waits with impatience the issue of his judgment. Here I would ask again, whether the verdict of his friend, according as it is favourable or unfavourable, will not greatly increase or diminish his confidence in his own judgment? Most certainly it will, and it ought.

If the judgment of his friend agrees with his own, especially if it be confirmed by two or three able judges, he rests of his discovery without farther examination; but if it be unfavourable, he is brought back into a kind of suspense, until the part that is suspected undergoes a new and a more rigorous examination.²

The example of the mathematician shows that, even in mathematics, evidence that p is true may be fragile if some one individual is the only person to believe that p on the basis of that evidence. If we reject (1), the domain of rational beliefs will evidently be extremely narrow. This is clear if even demonstrative truths would not belong to it. So it is important that it is possible for A to have good reasons for believing that B has good reasons for believing that p , and may be in general more important than A's having in hand evidence that p is true.

But we still need to ask whether we are entitled to pass from (1) to:

(2) If A has good reasons to believe that B knows that p , A knows that p .

Let us call (2) the *principle of testimony transparency*. Under certain conditions, we can know that p because we have been told that p . Against this principle, we find another one, the *principle of testimony opacity*:

² T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. by Derek R. Brookes, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2002, VI, 4, p. 465.

(3) A knows that B knows that p only if A knows that p .

According to this principle, if someone tells us that p , we only know that he believes that p . We know something about his opinion, but we do not thereby know that p . The principle of testimony opacity has been defended by many formidable authorities, including Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas, Descartes and Kant. So, even if we accept the principle of credulity, we cannot immediately swallow the principle of testimony transparency.

Many philosophers have rejected the principle of transparency and implicitly accepted the principle of testimony opacity, because they also accepted a third principle: the principle that believing and knowing are disjoint. This means that to believe something is not to know it, and to know it is not to believe it. On this idea, knowledge is not true, justified belief, but something different and better. If we know that p , then p cannot be false. Knowledge is infallible. This notion of exclusivity of belief and knowledge plays a crucial role even for philosophers who present themselves as fallibilists and who seem to accept the idea that knowledge can be identified with the set of best beliefs. For example, David Lewis says:

If . . . knowledge is by definition infallible, then we have very little knowledge indeed—not the abundant everyday knowledge we thought we had. This is . . . absurd.³

But at the same time he says:

If you are a contented fallibilist, I implore you to be honest, be naive, hear it afresh. “He knows, yet he has not eliminated all possibilities of error.” Even if you’ve numbed your ears, doesn’t this overt, explicit fallibilism still sound wrong?⁴

However, I think that Reid’s principle of credulity is weaker than the principle of epistemic transparency and does not invite us to renounce to the incompatibility of knowledge and belief. Even if we cannot be said to know that p on the basis of testimony, we can have a *warranted belief* that p on such a basis. As I understand it, the principle of credulity simply says that a large number of our most important beliefs are warranted by their source. It does not affirm that if one has good reasons to believe that B knows that p , one knows that p .

Now, let us suppose that this last remark is a good defence of Reid’s principle of credulity. I must confess to you now that I think that the position I have presented is not the best one. Leaving aside the possibility that the principle of testimony transparency might simply be wrong, the main defect of the defence I just gave is that it accepts an epistemological model that is hostile to the very idea of legitimate testimonial beliefs. It presupposes the kind of epistemology (and even of philoso-

3 D. Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”, *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 419.

4 D. Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”, p. 420.

phy of mind) Reid was fighting against, and it can give testimony only a certain sort of second-class legitimacy in domains where authority may be accepted.⁵

I think that Reid was defending something quite different from an epistemology of weak beliefs that we may gain by default—something more “subversive”, as a French contemporary philosopher might say.

2. To understand Reid’s principle of credulity, one must look for an epistemological model within which it may be accepted without restriction, rather than merely in application to marginal cases. I will distinguish two types of epistemological models, *deontological* and *non-deontological*. And among the non-deontological models, I will further distinguish two types: *reliabilistic* models, and *models based on the notion of epistemic virtue*.⁶ We thus have a three-part classification.

The main principle deontological models in epistemology is that *all that is not specifically allowed is prohibited*. In other words, it is rational to believe only what we are obliged to believe. So, we must examine our beliefs to determine whether we are obliged to accept them. This model is internalist, for it supposes that we can introspectively examine our beliefs and decide their epistemological value, according criteria that we ourselves have set up. This model is also individualistic: each of us is seen as responsible for her own noetic structure. Built into the model is a strong supposition of epistemic autonomy: by a solitary effort, like a sort of Cartesian hero in a risky epistemological adventure, each of us is able to secure her own noetic structure.

A non-deontological epistemology is based upon the principle that *all that is not explicitly prohibited is permitted*. According to this, it is in general not necessary to justify our beliefs, or to legitimate them through a reflexive examination of the reasons that ground them. A belief must of course be warranted, but to be so it must simply result from the normal process for the acquisition of beliefs of the relevant sort.

As previously mentioned, we can distinguish two varieties of non-deontological epistemology; one is reliabilist and the other can be identified with virtue epistemology (according to my understanding of the latter, explained in the sequel).

The reliabilist model says that, in certain circumstances, the epistemological legitimacy of a belief is simply the fact that it has been acquired through a reliable process. What is worrying with the the completely reliabilist model is that it is

5 See also R. Pouivet, “Croyance religieuse, crédulité et vertu”. «Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie», vol. 134, II/III, 2002; “L’épistémologie du témoignage et les vertus”, *Philosophie*, n° 88, 2005.

6 Linda Zagzebski’s *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, is still the main reference in this domain. Two recent important books: J. Greco, *Achieving Knowledge: A Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010; J. Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011. Marco Damonte’s paper, “From Justification to Warrant, Towards Virtue Epistemology” («Epistemologia», XXXIV, 2011) is a very useful presentation of virtue epistemology.

non normative. But the concepts of belief and justification *are normative*. One can blame someone for having an unwarranted belief. If you have been told to take a particular medicine by a doctor who had an unwarranted belief about your disease, the doctor may be blamed. Doctors must have warranted beliefs when they prescribe a treatment. It is the same for journalists, plane pilots, professors (even of professors of philosophy), and many others, in their various fields of competence. It has been argued that we are morally responsible for our beliefs, for example by William K. Clifford in his well-known paper, "The Ethics of Belief". But the reliabilist model seems unable to account for this normative dimension.

When we refer to the process through which a belief has been acquired, we indicate its cause; but we do not thereby indicate any reason which supports it. To believe legitimately that *p* and to indicate the temperature are two very different things. So, the reliabilist model is not a better vehicle for legitimating testimonial beliefs than the deontological model.

Fortunately, however, there is a third model, non-deontological but not merely reliabilist. The process of belief acquisition must indeed be reliable; this is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition. In addition, the believer must also possess certain *epistemic virtues*, which warrant her beliefs. Here, belief acquisition is not merely a causal process. It has a normative and rational dimension. Only those who have the specific virtues, acquired through education in a socially appropriate environment, can have warranted beliefs. These epistemic virtues contrast with epistemic vices.

The following schema may help to clarify this idea:

Vices (of defect)	Epistemic virtues	Vices (of excess)
Indifference	Epistemic Impartiality	Partiality
Narrowness	Epistemic Sobriety	Profligacy
Paralysis	Epistemic Courage	Temerity
Dispersion	Epistemic Pertinence	Obsession
Laxity	Reflective Equilibrium	Rigidity

I cannot offer detailed comments here upon this classification⁷. I will explain only one example, the virtue of reflective equilibrium. This is the capacity to rectify a rule if unacceptable consequences are found to result from its application, or to disavow some uncomfortable consequences if the preservation of the rule seems desirable. The virtue of reflective equilibrium may be viewed as a kind of cleverness pertaining to changes in one's beliefs.

7 See R. Pouivet, *Qu'est-ce que croire ?*, Vrin, Paris 2003; *Le réalisme esthétique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2006, chap. II: L'épistémologie des vertus.

Even if I cannot comment in any detail on my classification of epistemic virtues and vices, I will try to explain why people need epistemic virtues, by focusing on the example of testimony. There are three things that we should notice especially in this connection. First, in most cases, the question before a rational epistemological agent is not *what* to believe but *whom* to believe. If we distinguish between basic beliefs (those beliefs whose warrant does not depend upon other beliefs) and inferred beliefs (whose warrant depends upon other beliefs), we will quickly appreciate that the set of basic beliefs consists largely of testimonial beliefs. Second, we would simply be unable to have the set of warranted beliefs that we have, were we to exclude testimonial beliefs from the set of basic beliefs. Third, we saw reason earlier on to favor an epistemological model that gives a role to the principle of credulity, and that is exactly what virtue epistemology permits. If we have the epistemic virtues, we are able to accept testimonial beliefs without undue suspicion, but also without lapsing into the policy of “anything goes”. These virtues enable us to learn from others without being gullible, but also without the narrowness that would make us reject unfamiliar ideas, simply because they are unfamiliar. The virtues allow us to be epistemically confident, without displaying epistemic temerity or paralysis. They also allow us to balance testimonial beliefs with other beliefs, whether testimonial or non-testimonial, through reflective equilibrium.

So, to what should we aspire as epistemic agents? To complete epistemic autonomy? No. It would be irrational to forego the best sources of knowledge, and an autonomous epistemic agent cannot be an ideal epistemic agent. So, it is often epistemically better to believe that p because you have good reasons to believe that someone who tells you that p has good reasons to believe it, than to pretend to have an intellectual intuition that p . What will give a heteronomous epistemic agent the best chance to acquire and develop true beliefs is the epistemic virtues that – among other things – permit her to recognize reliable authorities.

3. Whether or not the kind of virtue epistemology that has just been sketched is correct, it is clear that Thomas Reid did not propose such an account and said nothing about epistemic virtues. So what I am in effect proposing is a non-Reidian defence of Reid’s principle of credulity. But I also propose to read anew a famous passage of the *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, about the “social operations of mind”⁸, to give my non-Reidian defence of the principle of credulity a more Reidian flavour.

The social operations of mind that Reid speaks about “necessarily suppose an intercourse with some other intelligent being”⁹. Among these social operations one finds testimony, which is closer to promise and contract than it is to judgment, reasoning, or simple apprehension. Some commentators, including Keith Lehrer¹⁰, would like to understand the social operations of the mind as a precursor of the

8 T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, I, chap. 8.

9 T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p. 68.

10 Keith Lehrer, *Thomas Reid*, Routledge, London 1989, p. 93.

speech act theory developed by John Austin during the beautiful days of post-war Oxford philosophy. Reid's emphasis upon the fact that questions, promises, and commands are social acts, and likewise linguistic abilities, make this understanding possible. But another interpretation is also possible, which is moreover not incompatible with the speech act interpretation. We may notice that Reid says that "some operations of our minds, from their very nature, are *social*, other are *solitary*"¹¹. To say that some operations of our minds are *social* means that we have not only a human nature but also what may be called a "second nature". A second nature is a development of our human nature that (1) presupposes social conditions, and (2) can be weakened or strengthened by these conditions. I think that the virtues in general – the epistemic virtues among them – are part of our second nature: dispositions that can be developed only in social conditions. So the complete development of our own minds supposes that we have some *social* intellectual powers, powers of the sort that are at work in the relations that we necessarily have with others. Thus, although Reid does not speak of epistemic virtues, I think that this notion, as I use it, is not alien to the spirit of Reid's philosophy of mind. He says that "our social intellectual operations, as well as our social affections, appear very early in life, before we are capable of reasoning"¹². The thesis that some intellectual operations are prior to our capacity of reasoning could be interpreted this way: in our social intercourse during infancy, we acquire certain dispositions that will be very important in our future intellectual life, especially given that the so many of our basic beliefs are testimonial.

In the *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, Reid says that:

The infant, by proper nursing and care, acquires strength to walk without support. Reason has likewise her infancy, when she must be carried in arms: then she leans entirely upon authority, by natural instinct, as if she was conscious of her own weakness; and without this support, she becomes vertiginous. When brought to maturity by proper culture, she begins to feel her own strength, and leans less upon the reason of others; she learns to suspect testimony in some cases, and to disbelieve it in others; and sets bounds to that authority to which she was at first entirely subject.¹³

The analogy drawn in this passage between physical training and rational training is suggestive. We do not become truly rational thinkers through the enterprise of universal doubt, by examining our set of beliefs in search of a first, infallible, incorrigible, indubitable belief. We become rational agents by being well educated. Education is not indoctrination. We must be given room to question and to disbelieve testimony or, alternatively, to "find good reason to rely upon it with per-

11 T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p. 68.

12 T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p. 69.

13 T. Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. by Derek Brookes, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1997, p. 195.

fect security” (*idem*). We must, for example, be able to detect the “disinterestedness of witnesses”. This implies not only that the witnesses are endowed with the virtue of impartiality but also that we have virtues which enable us to detect that virtue. In French, we say that “les promesses engagent seulement ceux qui les croient” (“only those who believe in promises are committed by them”). It is the same for witnesses: liars are vicious, but sometimes it is no less a product of vice (ours) to be deceived.

Reid speaks also of the “impossibility of collusion” that gives to a testimony an “irresistible strength”¹⁴. I think that it is very important that he does not mention another requirement which has very often been considered important, especially when philosophers have discussed the witnessing of miracles (I, of course, have Hume in mind here): testimony has been said to be acceptable only if it coheres with the set of our previous beliefs. I think that this is false. For, if A needs to rely upon an authority in coming to believe that *p*, it is because the truth of *p* is not at all obvious to him and, sometimes, because it does not cohere with his previous beliefs. I of course believe all the people who tell me that they have never seen a miracle. But what is important is not to *automatically* disbelieve a person who claims to have witnessed a miracle. The weightiest reasons for believing a witness or an authority derive from our capacity to assess the epistemic quality of the witness, not from the content of her testimony. And this capacity itself depends upon our epistemic virtues.

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Reid’s account of testimony is, I think, one of the best parts of his epistemology, even if it is not very detailed. This is why I thought it useful to show how his principle of credulity could be grounded in a certain sort of virtue epistemology. From such a perspective, testimony – and perhaps also tradition in its broadest sense – need not be seen as epistemically deficient. The royal road to knowledge need no longer be seen as a process of meditation within our own minds, consisting in the constant and rigorous testing of our beliefs. We acquire knowledge largely from others, through social intercourse and tradition. Our main protection against the dangers inherent in our relying upon tradition and testimony are our epistemic virtues, which are themselves acquired, and so also a gift of socialization and tradition.

Roger Pouivet
Université de Lorraine
Roger.Pouivet@univ-nancy2.fr

14 T. Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, p. 195.

Roger Pouivet, è professore presso la Université de Lorraine, nonché direttore del Laboratoire d'Histoire des Sciences et de Philosophie – Archives Poincaré (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique). Si interessa principalmente di filosofia dell'arte (in modo particolare di ontologia e metafisica dell'arte) e di epistemologia delle credenze religiose. Le sue pubblicazioni includono: *Esthétique et logique* (Mardaga, Liège 1996), *Qu'est-ce que croire?* (Vrin, Paris 2006, 2nd ed.), *Le réalisme esthétique* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), *Qu'est-ce qu'une oeuvre d'art?* (Vrin, Paris 2007), *L'ontologie de l'oeuvre d'art* (Vrin, Paris 2010, 2nd ed.), *Philosophie du rock* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), *La philosophie de Nelson Goodman* (with J. Morizot, Vrin, Paris 2011). Recentemente ha pubblicato (con C. Michon): *Philosophie de la religion: Approches contemporaines* (Vrin, Paris 2010), e (con D. Lukasiewicz) *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology* (Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt/Oder 2012).