

“No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish.”

David Hume



David Hume (1711-76) was a *reductionist* (see definition) about testimony. As such he was sceptical that testimony *alone* could support knowledge, without further (non-testimonial) good reasons to believe. A famous expression of Hume’s reductionist leanings is present in his thinking about testimony that a *miracle* occurred. Given that

Hume thinks that a rational person proportions his belief to the evidence he has for that belief, he thinks that where an event testified to is sufficiently extraordinary (like a miracle) then the testimonial evidence must also be of a very remarkable quality too if it is to be credible.

Hence even very reliable witnesses might face a difficult, and perhaps impossible, task in making sufficiently unlikely events credible.



Thought experiment

Who do you trust the most? Suppose that this person comes up to you and tells you that they’ve just seen the most extraordinary thing: a tennis ball suddenly flew upwards, out of their hands, and then shot off mysteriously toward the sun. You ask if your friend is joking, but they assure you they are not. Your friend has never lied to you before, and insists that—although this event sounds very unlikely—they saw it with their own eyes and promise you that it really did happen. Several days pass, and your friend continues to tell you the exact same story.

Questions:

Do you have a good reason to believe that things happened as your friend said? *Would* you believe this testimony? Regardless of whether you would, *should* you?

Questions...



Give some examples of beliefs that you hold which are based on testimony and some examples of beliefs that you hold which are not based on testimony. In each case explain either why the basis for the belief is testimonial or non-testimonial.

Why can’t we just believe everything we are told (i.e., all instances of testimony that are presented to us)? How might this lead us astray?

Why might it be problematic to refuse to form beliefs on the basis of testimony? How might this limit us?

How might it be problematic to refuse to form one’s beliefs on the basis of testimony? How might this limit us?

How does Hume suggest that this tension can be resolved?



Thomas Reid
(1710-1796)

Thomas Reid was a great Scottish philosopher, a minister at the Church of Scotland and a Professor at the University of Aberdeen. Reid was a *non-reductionist* (see definition) about testimony. In his most famous work, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), he wrote: 'If there are certain principles, as I think there are, which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them—these are what we call the *principles of common sense*; and what is manifestly contrary to them, we may call absurd'.

What *is* testimonial knowledge?

Testimonial knowledge is knowledge we gain via the testimony of others. In the usual case, this will simply involve someone telling us what they know, but we can also gain testimonial knowledge in other more indirect ways, such as by *reading* the testimony of others (in a leaflet like this one, say).

Getting knowledge by testimony is important because there are *many* things one simply couldn't find out about for oneself (think, for example, of distant historical events).

Question: is getting knowledge by testimony as easy as *just believing whatever anyone tells you?* (See the pages on **Hume** and **Reid** for more discussion on this point). The contemporary debate about testimony divides between two camps, known as **reductionism** and **anti-reductionism**.

REDUCTIONISM: one should base one's beliefs acquired via testimony on *non-testimonial evidence*, and in this sense testimony is 'reduced' to non-testimonial sources.

ANTI-REDUCTIONISM: knowledge can be had by testimony even in the absence of non-testimonial evidence; trusting another's word is by itself a route to knowledge.

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY **MOOC**



Should you *believe* what you *hear*?

Many of our beliefs are the result of trusting the word of others. But to what extent should we form beliefs based on testimony? Is trusting someone ever a route to knowledge?

