

A CRITIQUE OF JENNIFER LACKEY'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Jennifer Lackey's epistemology of testimony, focusing on her rejection of the traditional transmission model and her attempt to explain testimonial knowledge through a generative account. Testimony remains a fundamental issue in contemporary epistemology because a significant portion of human knowledge is acquired through the assertions and communications of others. However, the conditions under which testimonial beliefs constitute knowledge continue to generate philosophical disagreement. This paper argues that while Lackey's critique of the transmission model successfully challenges both reductionist and non-reductionist assumptions, her account does not provide a complete explanation of testimonial knowledge. Through an analysis of the nature of testimony, the limitations of epistemic transmission, and Lackey's Statement View, the paper demonstrates that her emphasis on the epistemic role of the hearer represents an important advancement in social epistemology. Nevertheless, it contends that her theory insufficiently addresses the normative dimensions of testimony, particularly trust, speaker responsibility, credibility, and institutional structures. The paper therefore proposes a third option that understands testimony as a socially embedded epistemic practice sustained by the interaction of reliable communication, responsible speakers, critically engaged hearers, and trustworthy epistemic institutions. It concludes that Lackey's theory is a necessary but incomplete account of testimony, whose strongest insights are best preserved within a broader framework that integrates epistemic agency with the social conditions required for the production of knowledge.

Keywords: Critique, Jennifer Lackey, Epistemology of Testimony.

Introduction

Testimony occupies a central place in contemporary epistemology because a substantial proportion of human knowledge depends on information acquired through the reports, assertions, and communications of others. Knowledge of history, science, medicine, geography, and countless aspects of everyday life is largely inaccessible through direct observation alone, making testimony an indispensable source of belief formation and knowledge acquisition (Gelfert, 2014, pp. 7–8). Despite its ubiquity, testimony raises a fundamental philosophical question: under what conditions can beliefs acquired from the words of others legitimately count as knowledge? This question has generated sustained debate because testimony appears to differ from traditional epistemic sources such as perception, memory, and inference by relying essentially on social interaction.

The modern epistemology of testimony is largely shaped by the opposing positions of David Hume and Thomas Reid. Hume argues that testimonial beliefs require independent evidential support grounded in experience before they can be rationally accepted (Hume, 2007, p. 74). Reid, by contrast, maintains that human beings possess natural principles of veracity and credulity that provide a *prima facie* entitlement to accept testimony unless reasons for doubt arise (Reid, 1997, p. 194). These competing perspectives evolved into the contemporary divide between reductionism and non-reductionism, each offering a distinctive account of testimonial justification while encountering persistent philosophical difficulties. Reductionism struggles to explain how testimonial knowledge remains practically indispensable if every assertion requires independent verification, whereas non-reductionism risks encouraging excessive epistemic trust by granting hearers a default entitlement to believe others.

Jennifer Lackey intervenes in this debate by challenging a fundamental assumption shared by both traditions: namely, that testimony merely transmits knowledge from a knowledgeable speaker to a hearer. Rejecting this transmission model, she argues that testimony can generate knowledge even when the speaker does not possess the knowledge ultimately acquired by the hearer (Lackey, 2008, pp. 36–37). By relocating epistemic significance from the speaker's private beliefs to the public act of assertion, Lackey offers a more dynamic account of testimonial exchange that highlights the active epistemic role of both speaker and hearer. Her theory has therefore become one of the most influential contributions to contemporary social epistemology because it broadens the conceptual framework through which testimonial knowledge is understood.

Nevertheless, while Lackey's rejection of the transmission model successfully exposes important weaknesses in both reductionism and non-reductionism, her generation theory remains philosophically incomplete. By emphasizing the epistemic productivity of assertions, she underestimates the normative significance of speaker responsibility, epistemic trust, credibility, and the institutional conditions that sustain reliable testimonial practices. Consequently, this paper argues that although Lackey's critique of the transmission model marks a decisive advance in the epistemology of testimony, her account does not provide a fully satisfactory explanation of testimonial knowledge. A more adequate theory must preserve her

insight into the active epistemic role of the hearer while integrating the indispensable contributions of trustworthy speakers, rational trust, and the broader social norms that govern epistemic exchange. It is this position that the present critique seeks to defend.

The Nature of Testimony

Testimony refers broadly to the communication of information, claims, or assertions from one person to another in a manner through which the recipient may acquire a belief or knowledge. In epistemology, however, testimony is more than ordinary communication because it concerns the conditions under which a person is entitled to rely on what another person says as a source of knowledge. When a doctor informs a patient about a medical condition, a teacher explains a historical event to students, a witness reports what was observed, or an individual tells another person where a particular place is located, the hearer may acquire information without independently observing or establishing the truth of the claim. Testimony therefore involves an epistemic relationship between a speaker and a hearer in which the hearer depends, at least partly, on the communicative contribution of another person. Coady treats testimony as a fundamental source of knowledge and argues that human knowledge would be severely restricted if individuals were required to establish every proposition through personal observation or independent reasoning (Coady, 1992, pp. 6–14). The epistemological significance of testimony consequently lies in the fact that it enables individuals to acquire knowledge that extends beyond the limits of their own experience and reasoning.

The concept of testimony also raises questions about the roles of both the speaker and the hearer in the production of knowledge. A testimonial exchange does not involve merely the movement of information from one mind to another. The speaker communicates a proposition, while the hearer interprets, evaluates, and may accept or reject what has been communicated. This makes testimony simultaneously a communicative and epistemic practice. The speaker's sincerity, competence, and reliability may affect whether the testimony deserves acceptance, while the hearer's background knowledge, attentiveness, and ability to recognize reasons for doubt may affect whether knowledge is successfully acquired. The philosophical problem is therefore not simply whether people obtain information from others, but how such information acquires epistemic authority for the hearer. This question has made testimony a central subject in social epistemology, particularly because much of what individuals know about history, science, geography, medicine, politics, and everyday affairs depends upon information that they cannot personally verify. The central issue, therefore, is to determine the epistemic conditions under which reliance on another person's assertion can legitimately result in knowledge.

The traditional debate concerning testimony has largely developed between reductionist and non-reductionist approaches. Reductionism, most prominently associated with David Hume, maintains that testimonial belief requires some form of independent epistemic support. On this view, a hearer cannot simply rely on another person's assertion without having some reason to regard the speaker or the testimony as reliable. Hume's account gives considerable importance to past experience: people come to regard testimony as trustworthy because they have repeatedly observed a connection between testimony and truth (Hume, 2000, pp. 87–88). Testimonial justification is consequently reduced, at least in significant part, to evidence that

does not itself depend on the testimony being evaluated. The attraction of reductionism is that it emphasizes epistemic responsibility by requiring the hearer to have grounds for accepting what another person says. It also provides room for distinguishing trustworthy testimony from deceptive, incompetent, or unreliable communication. Its difficulty, however, is that if every testimonial belief requires independent evidence concerning the reliability of the speaker, the ordinary acquisition of knowledge through testimony becomes excessively demanding. Much of what people know is acquired from sources whose reliability cannot be individually established through prior experience.

Non-reductionism offers a contrasting account. Thomas Reid argues that human beings possess natural principles of veracity and credulity that make communication and the acceptance of testimony possible (Reid, 1983, pp. 281–282). On this view, testimony does not ordinarily require the hearer to establish its reliability through independent evidence before it can provide epistemic justification. Tyler Burge develops a contemporary version of this approach by arguing that a person may possess a *prima facie* entitlement to accept information presented through testimony, provided there are no specific reasons for doubt (Burge, 1993, pp. 467–468). Non-reductionism therefore treats testimony as a basic source of epistemic justification rather than as a source whose authority must always be derived from perception, memory, or inference. Its strength lies in its ability to explain the ordinary and indispensable role of testimony in human knowledge. Nevertheless, the position raises a different concern: if hearers are entitled to accept testimony by default, it becomes necessary to explain how such entitlement is limited in circumstances involving deception, incompetence, prejudice, misinformation, or other defeaters. The disagreement between reductionism and non-reductionism consequently concerns not whether testimony matters, but the basis upon which testimonial belief acquires epistemic justification. It is within this longstanding dispute that Jennifer Lackey develops her distinctive account.

Lackey's central contribution lies in her challenge to several influential approaches that shaped the traditional understanding of testimony. One of these is the Transmission View, which treats testimony primarily as a process through which an epistemic property possessed by the speaker, such as knowledge or justification, is transmitted to the hearer. On this account, the epistemic status of the hearer's belief is closely connected to the epistemic status of the speaker's belief. A related position is the Belief View of Testimony (BVT), which gives priority to the speaker's belief in explaining the epistemic significance of testimony. According to this view, a statement derives its epistemic significance largely from the belief that it expresses; the statement therefore functions as a vehicle through which the speaker's epistemic state is communicated to the hearer. Lackey also challenges the Narrow View of Testimony, associated particularly with Coady, which defines testimony in terms of an intentional communicative act in which a speaker presents information to an audience (Coady, 1992, pp. 42–44). Although these approaches capture important features of testimonial exchange, Lackey argues that they impose conditions on testimony that should not be treated as necessary for understanding its epistemic character. In particular, they risk making testimony dependent upon the speaker's possession of knowledge, the speaker's underlying belief, or the intention to communicate information to a particular audience. For Lackey, such requirements are problematic because they may exclude

cases in which a hearer acquires knowledge from an assertion even though the speaker lacks the relevant knowledge or belief, or did not intend the particular hearer to receive the information. She therefore maintains that an adequate account of testimony must distinguish the question of what testimony is from the separate question of when testimony succeeds in producing knowledge (Lackey, 2008, pp. 13–18). To correct this problem, Lackey rejects narrow conceptions of testimony that make it dependent upon a speaker's intention to communicate knowledge. The Narrow View, associated with Coady, understands testimony primarily as an intentional communicative act directed toward an audience (Coady, 1992, pp. 42–44). Although this captures formal cases of testimony, such as expert reports or courtroom statements, Lackey argues that it excludes ordinary cases where knowledge is acquired through overheard conversations, accidental disclosures, or written materials produced without a particular hearer in mind (Lackey, 2008, pp. 16–18). Conversely, she also rejects overly broad accounts that classify every expression of belief as testimony because such views fail to distinguish genuine information-sharing from other forms of communication.

Lackey's alternative is the “Disjunctive View of Testimony”, which maintains that testimony can be understood through two related but distinct dimensions. On one side, testimony involves a speaker's intentional act of communicating information; on the other, it involves a hearer's acquisition of information from a communicative source, even when the speaker did not intend to testify to that particular person (Lackey, 2008, pp. 26–27, 35–37). This distinction allows Lackey to explain a wider range of testimonial practices without making epistemic success part of the definition itself. Her account is significant because it recognizes that testimony is not merely a psychological event occurring within the speaker but a social epistemic practice involving communication, interpretation, and the active participation of the hearer. However, while Lackey's account successfully expands our understanding of testimony, it also introduces a philosophical tension. By separating testimony from the speaker's epistemic condition, she creates room for cases where knowledge appears possible even when speakers lack knowledge themselves. This insight challenges the traditional transmission model and reveals that testimonial knowledge cannot be understood simply as the movement of epistemic properties from speaker to hearer. Nevertheless, it also raises questions about whether an adequate theory of testimony can fully disregard the normative importance of speaker credibility, responsibility, and trust. Thus, Lackey's reconceptualization represents a significant advancement in the epistemology of testimony, but its ultimate adequacy depends on whether it can preserve both hearer agency and the social norms that make testimonial knowledge possible.

Rejecting Transmission

A central feature of Jennifer Lackey's epistemology of testimony is her rejection of the traditional transmission model, according to which testimony functions merely as a channel through which knowledge, justification, or warrant is transferred from a knowledgeable speaker to a hearer. According to this model, the epistemic status of the hearer's belief depends fundamentally on the epistemic status of the speaker's belief. If the speaker knows a proposition and communicates it successfully, the hearer acquires knowledge; if the speaker lacks knowledge, then there is supposedly no epistemic value available for transmission. Lackey

argues that this understanding misrepresents the nature of testimonial exchange because it treats testimony as a passive mechanism of transferring already existing epistemic properties rather than as an independent practice capable of generating knowledge (Lackey, 2008, pp. 35–37).

The transmission model is closely associated with what Lackey calls the “Belief View of Testimony (BVT)”. According to this position, the speaker’s belief is the primary bearer of epistemic significance, while the statement merely serves as a vehicle through which that belief is communicated. Consequently, testimonial knowledge is explained by the movement of epistemic properties from the speaker’s mind to the hearer’s mind. Lackey challenges this assumption by arguing that hearers do not encounter the private beliefs of speakers; rather, they encounter publicly expressed statements. Therefore, the epistemological focus should not be placed exclusively on the speaker’s internal mental state but on the communicative act through which information becomes available for evaluation (Lackey, 2008, pp. 71–73).

Lackey’s criticism is directed particularly against the idea that knowledge must always be transmitted from someone who already possesses it. She argues that this assumption fails to account for ordinary cases where individuals acquire knowledge from sources that are not themselves knowledgeable about the information they communicate. Her well-known examples demonstrate that a speaker may provide accurate information without possessing the relevant belief or knowledge, while a hearer may nevertheless acquire genuine knowledge from that testimony (Lackey, 2008, pp. 46–50). Such cases reveal that the epistemic status of the speaker and the epistemic status of the hearer are not always identical. Knowledge acquisition through testimony therefore cannot be reduced to a simple transfer of epistemic properties.

The significance of Lackey’s argument is that it transforms testimony from a merely preservative activity into a generative epistemic practice. Traditional theories often assume that testimony can only preserve knowledge that already exists in the speaker. Lackey rejects this assumption by arguing that testimonial exchanges can produce new epistemic achievements through the interaction between reliable statements and responsible hearers. In this sense, testimony possesses an epistemic role similar to other knowledge-producing practices because it contributes something more than the simple reproduction of another person’s cognitive state.

Lackey also rejects the “sufficiency thesis” of the transmission model, which holds that a knowledgeable speaker’s testimony is automatically sufficient for a hearer’s acquisition of knowledge. She argues that even when speakers possess knowledge, hearers may fail to acquire knowledge because of misunderstanding, prejudice, lack of attention, or the presence of defeating evidence (Lackey, 2008, pp. 65–67). Testimonial knowledge therefore requires more than a competent speaker; it also requires appropriate epistemic engagement from the hearer. This emphasis on hearer responsibility represents one of Lackey’s strongest contributions because it prevents testimony from being understood as a process of passive acceptance.

However, although Lackey’s rejection of transmission successfully exposes the weaknesses of traditional accounts, it also generates an important philosophical concern. By emphasizing the independence of the hearer’s epistemic position, Lackey risks weakening the normative importance of the speaker’s role in testimonial exchange. Testimony is not merely a mechanism

for producing true beliefs; it is a social practice grounded in expectations of sincerity, competence, and responsibility. As Faulkner argues, assertions involve interpersonal commitments because speakers present themselves as reliable sources of information (Faulkner, 2011, pp. 56–61). Similarly, Greco argues that allowing knowledge to arise from speakers who lack knowledge themselves threatens the connection between epistemic authority and epistemic responsibility (Greco, 2010, pp. 138–139).

Therefore, while Lackey is correct that testimonial knowledge cannot be explained as a simple transmission of epistemic properties, rejecting transmission does not eliminate the importance of the speaker's contribution. A satisfactory epistemology of testimony must recognize that knowledge emerges through the interaction of both speaker and hearer. Lackey's critique represents a major advancement because it reveals the limitations of the transmission model, but her account requires further development to explain how individual epistemic agency can be balanced with the social norms that sustain trust and credibility in testimonial practices.

Lackey's Position

Having rejected the transmission model, Jennifer Lackey develops a positive account of testimony that seeks to explain how testimonial knowledge is possible. Her central argument is that testimony should not be understood as the mere transfer of beliefs from a knowledgeable speaker to a passive hearer. Rather, testimony is an independent epistemic practice through which knowledge can be generated. By shifting attention away from the speaker's private psychological state and toward the public act of assertion, Lackey attempts to provide an account of testimony that recognizes both the social character of knowledge and the active epistemic role of the hearer (Lackey, 2008, pp. 71–73).

The foundation of Lackey's theory is the "Statement View of Testimony (SVT)", which she develops as an alternative to the traditional "Belief View of Testimony (BVT)". The Belief View assumes that the epistemic value of testimony originates from the speaker's belief because statements are merely expressions of underlying mental states. Lackey rejects this assumption by arguing that such a view places excessive emphasis on an inaccessible psychological condition. A hearer does not directly receive another person's belief; rather, the hearer encounters a statement that can be evaluated, accepted, rejected, or challenged. Therefore, statements themselves, rather than private beliefs, should occupy the central position in explaining testimonial knowledge (Lackey, 2008, pp. 72–73).

This shift is philosophically significant because it changes the understanding of what makes testimony epistemically valuable. For Lackey, the important question is not whether a speaker possesses the same knowledge that the hearer eventually acquires, but whether the statement provided gives the hearer adequate grounds for knowledge. Testimony becomes epistemically productive because assertions operate within communicative practices where information can be assessed independently of the speaker's internal cognitive condition. In this way, Lackey challenges the traditional assumption that epistemic authority must always originate from a knowledgeable source.

A major implication of Lackey's position is her claim that testimony has a "generative" rather than merely "transmissive" function. Traditional accounts maintain that testimony preserves knowledge but does not create it. Lackey rejects this limitation by arguing that testimonial exchanges can produce knowledge even when the speaker lacks the relevant epistemic status. Her argument is illustrated through the example of the creationist science teacher who accurately teaches evolutionary theory despite personally rejecting it. Although the teacher lacks belief in the proposition being taught, students may still acquire genuine knowledge because the information communicated is reliable and situated within an appropriate educational context (Lackey, 2008, pp. 36–37). The example demonstrates that knowledge acquisition depends not only on the speaker's mental state but also on the reliability of the communicative process.

Lackey's account also emphasizes the active role of the hearer. Contrary to models that portray testimonial belief as automatic acceptance, she argues that hearers participate in knowledge formation through interpretation, evaluation, and responsiveness to possible defeaters. A hearer must understand the content of the testimony and possess the appropriate epistemic conditions for accepting it. Thus, testimonial knowledge is produced through cooperation between communicative acts and epistemically responsible agents rather than through passive reception alone (Lackey, 2008, pp. 76–77).

Lackey's theory offers an important corrective to earlier approaches because it captures features of testimony that reductionist and non-reductionist theories struggle to explain. It recognizes that speakers do not always function as repositories of knowledge whose epistemic status is simply transferred to others. At the same time, it avoids treating hearers as passive recipients who must accept testimony merely because communication has occurred. In this respect, Lackey provides a more realistic account of how knowledge is often acquired in actual social environments. Nevertheless, Lackey's position raises a significant philosophical difficulty. By locating the source of testimonial knowledge primarily in the reliability of statements, her theory risks neglecting the normative relationships that make testimonial practices possible. Statements do not exist independently of social contexts; they are produced by speakers who possess responsibilities concerning sincerity, competence, and honesty. If knowledge can be generated even by speakers who lack understanding of what they communicate, the connection between epistemic authority and speaker responsibility becomes unclear. Furthermore, while Lackey rightly emphasizes hearer agency, an excessive focus on the hearer may reduce testimony to a process of information acquisition rather than a distinctive interpersonal epistemic relationship.

Therefore, Lackey's position represents a major advancement in the epistemology of testimony because it successfully demonstrates that testimonial knowledge cannot be explained as simple transmission. However, her theory remains incomplete because it does not sufficiently account for the normative dimensions of trust, credibility, and speaker responsibility. A comprehensive account of testimony must preserve Lackey's insight that hearers actively participate in knowledge acquisition while also recognizing that reliable testimonial practices depend upon broader social and ethical conditions.

The Possibility of a Third Option

The limitations of both traditional transmission theories and Jennifer Lackey's generation account suggest that the epistemology of testimony cannot be adequately explained through a simple choice between reductionism and non-reductionism. While Lackey successfully demonstrates that testimonial knowledge is not merely transferred from knowledgeable speakers to passive hearers, her account does not fully explain the normative conditions that make testimonial knowledge possible. In particular, the role of trust, speaker responsibility, credibility, and social institutions remains insufficiently developed. This suggests the need for a third option: an account of testimony that recognizes the active role of the hearer without abandoning the social and normative structures that sustain reliable communication.

The appeal of this third option arises from the weaknesses of the dominant positions in the debate. Reductionism, represented most clearly by Hume, correctly emphasizes the importance of critical evaluation. It recognizes that testimony cannot be accepted without regard to evidence, reliability, and possible sources of error. However, its demand that testimonial justification ultimately depend on independent evidence creates an unrealistic picture of human knowledge. Much of what human beings know cannot be independently verified by individual reason or experience. Scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, and expert knowledge frequently require reliance on others whose authority cannot always be personally established. Reductionism therefore captures the importance of epistemic responsibility but fails to appreciate the practical and social dependence of knowledge.

Non-reductionism provides an important correction by recognizing testimony as a basic source of knowledge. Reid's emphasis on natural trust and Burge's concept of *prima facie* entitlement demonstrate that communication would be impossible if human beings approached every assertion with complete suspicion (Reid, 1983, pp. 281–282; Burge, 1993, pp. 467–468). Nevertheless, non-reductionism risks overstating the legitimacy of default trust. Testimonial practices occur within social environments where deception, prejudice, misinformation, and unequal distributions of credibility exist. As Fricker argues, social conditions can influence whose testimony is accepted and whose testimony is unfairly dismissed (Fricker, 2007, pp. 1–5). Therefore, any adequate account of testimony must preserve trust while also maintaining critical awareness.

The proposed third option rejects the assumption that testimony must be either fully reducible to individual evidence or completely independent of evaluation. Instead, it understands testimony as a socially embedded epistemic practice in which knowledge emerges through the interaction of several factors: reliable communication, responsible speakers, critically engaged hearers, and trustworthy epistemic institutions. This approach accepts Lackey's important insight that hearers are active participants in testimonial knowledge, but it argues that hearer agency alone cannot explain the full structure of testimony. Knowledge acquired through testimony is not produced by statements in isolation; it depends upon networks of social relationships and norms that determine whether communication functions reliably.

This position is supported by contemporary work in social epistemology. Goldman argues that knowledge production often depends on social systems and institutions that regulate the reliability of information exchange (Goldman, 1999, pp. 109–114). Similarly, Kitcher emphasizes that knowledge is frequently a collective achievement rather than the product of isolated individuals (Kitcher, 1990, p. 6). These perspectives reveal an important limitation in Lackey's account: although she successfully moves beyond the speaker's private belief, she continues to focus primarily on the relationship between individual speakers and hearers. However, many forms of testimony, especially in science, law, education, and history, operate through institutional structures that establish standards of credibility and verification.

A third option therefore does not reject Lackey's contribution but places it within a broader framework. Her rejection of transmission remains valuable because it demonstrates that testimonial knowledge cannot be explained as the simple movement of epistemic properties from one individual to another. However, the generation of knowledge through testimony requires more than reliable statements. It requires a social environment in which speakers have obligations to communicate responsibly, hearers possess the capacity for critical assessment, and institutions support the production and evaluation of knowledge. Consequently, the most plausible account of testimony is one that combines the insights of reductionism, non-reductionism, and Lackey's generation theory without accepting the limitations of any single approach. Testimony is neither merely an inference from past experience nor an unquestionable source of knowledge; neither is it simply a reliable statement detached from social responsibility. Rather, it is a complex epistemic practice sustained by the relationship between trust and criticism, individual agency and social norms. Such an account provides a more complete explanation of testimonial knowledge because it recognizes that human knowledge is produced not only through individual reasoning but also through responsible participation in shared epistemic communities.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Jennifer Lackey's critique of the transmission model represents a significant advancement in the epistemology of testimony because it demonstrates that testimonial knowledge cannot be understood as a simple transfer of epistemic properties from speaker to hearer. However, the analysis has also shown that her generation theory remains incomplete because it underestimates the normative importance of trust, credibility, and speaker responsibility in testimonial practices. A satisfactory account of testimony must therefore move beyond the opposition between reductionism and non-reductionism by recognizing testimony as a socially embedded epistemic practice. While Lackey's emphasis on hearer agency should be preserved, it must be complemented by attention to the social norms and institutions that sustain reliable communication. Therefore, this paper concludes that Lackey's theory is a necessary but insufficient account of testimony; its strongest insights are realized only when integrated within a broader framework of epistemic trust, responsibility, and collective knowledge production. This approach succeeds.

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