

AUGUSTINE ON TESTIMONY

Philosophical work on testimony has flourished in recent years. Testimony roughly involves a source affirming or stating something in an attempt to transfer information to one or more persons. It is often said that the topic of testimony has been neglected throughout most of the history of philosophy, aside from contributions by David Hume (1711–1776) and Thomas Reid (1710–1796).¹ True as this may be, Hume and Reid aren't the only ones who deserve a tip of the hat for recognizing the importance of testimony: Augustine of Hippo (354–430) affirms the place of testimony in human cognition, at least in his later writings.

In what follows, we consider three questions raised by Augustine's thinking about testimony: the analytical question of what sources count as testimony (§1); the epistemological question about the status of testimony-based belief (§2); and the doxastic question about the circumstances in which it is appropriate to believe on the basis of testimony (§3). We outline Augustine's view of testimony by examining his answers to these three questions. Finally, we'll briefly situate Augustine within the tradition of thinking about testimony (§4), by way of conclusion.

A few preliminaries. Augustine occasionally uses '*testimonia*' to talk about one thing being a sign for another thing. For example, Augustine remarks that a Stoic philosopher's pallor during heavy seas testified to his fear (*ciu.* 9.4).² This isn't the philosophically interesting sort of testimony; any sign would 'testify' to its significate in this sense. Yet Augustine doesn't always indulge his tendency to use "testimony" to talk about any sign whatsoever. Often he explicitly treats testimony as a source that affirms something in an attempt to transfer information, a specific type of intentional activity. Brief passages are found in his *De libero arbitrio* 2.2.5, 14–15, *Confessiones* 6, *De Trinitate* 15, and *De ciuitate Dei* 11, with more sustained discussions in the course of his *De utilitate credendi*, *De fide rerum inuisibilium*, and *Epistula* 147. These texts will serve to explain Augustine's answers to the three questions mentioned above and to clarify the development of his views on testimony.

¹ For example, C. A. J. Coady [1992] 6 writes that most thinking about knowledge since Plato "has ignored testimony altogether or it has been cursory and dismissive." Coady discusses Augustine as an exception (18–21); we think Coady's discussion can be usefully extended and expanded, which is our task here.

² Sorabji [2000] 375–384 discusses this example in depth.

1. THE ANALYTICAL QUESTION

What sources count as testimony? Augustine maintains that testimonial sources include both spoken and written words: “We are,” he says, “informed by spoken or written words, or some other means” (*ep.* 147.3.8). These ‘other means’ include gestures, such as hand signals, nods, and the like.³ Now for some terminology: call the testimonial source the *testifier*, the testifier’s affirmation the *testimony* or *testimonial report*, and the recipient of the testimony the *hearer*. In his several discussions, Augustine appears to assume that a testifier doesn’t need the *firsthand* authority of an eyewitness or source – that is, a particular testifier may be many stages removed from the primary testifier (*ep.* 147.4.10). Since Augustine does not discuss his assumption explicitly, however, we will mainly consider cases involving primary testifiers. Note that eyewitness testimony should not be confused with expert testimony. Testimony from experts – be they philosophers, physicians, scientists, or whatever – needn’t concern something witnessed firsthand. Instead, expert testimony may concern the implications of some theory or method. Augustine doesn’t discuss expert testimony as such, though he does consider Biblical authors experts in their particular domain. Our attention will be directed to the general case of testimony, not to expert testimony.

Now Augustine’s many examples of testimonial reports concern places, people, events, and states of affairs. These examples involve testimonial reports about (i) foreign places,⁴ (ii) histories of people and nations,⁵ (iii) current events,⁶ and (iv) a hearer’s own biographical information.⁷ Augustine

³ See *mag.* 3.5 and *trin.* 15.10.19. In *doct. chr.* 2.3.4, Augustine says that the gestures of pantomimists “are, in a manner of speaking, visible words (*quasi uerba uisibilia*).”

⁴ For instance, “many facts concerning places and cities” (*conf.* 6.5.7); the ocean and “lands and cities which the most celebrated fame commends” (*trin.* 15.12.21); “places” (*f. inuis.* 2.4). It’s worth noting that both *ep.* 147 and *De utilitate credendi* are silent on this count.

⁵ For instance, “I believe that wicked conspirators were once put to death through the valour of Cicero” (*util. cred.* 11.2.5); “history” (*f. inuis.* 2.4); “incidents in the history of nations” (*conf.* 6.5.7); “men and their works” (*trin.* 15.12.21); “the origin of cities where we have never been, for example that Rome was founded by Romulus, or, to take more recent events, that Constantinople was founded by Constantine” (*ep.* 147.1.5).

⁶ For instance, “the news brought to us daily from everywhere” (*trin.* 15.12.21).

⁷ For instance, the identity of one’s parents (*util. cred.* 12.2.6, *conf.* 6.5.7, *f. inuis.* 2.4, *trin.* 15.12.21); or more generally “from what fathers, grandfathers, ancestors we have come” (*ep.* 147.1.5).

draws a further distinction between testimonial reports. Since a hearer may be “unable to demonstrate the fact because the event is already in the past” (*f. inuis.* 2.4),⁸ she cannot always check or verify a report’s authenticity. We’ll say that a report is *distant* only if the hearer cannot, even in principle, check it using non-testimonial evidence. However, the (epistemic) likelihood that a distant testimonial report is reliable can be increased with the support of additional, independent testimonial evidence. By contrast, we’ll say that a report is *proximate* if the hearer can – at least in principle – check the testimony using non-testimonial evidence. A proximate testimonial report can either be supported using additional testimonial evidence, or checked using sense-perception of the place, person, or event in question.⁹

2. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION

What, according to Augustine, is the epistemic status of testimony? That depends on when you ask him. For example, in his early dialogue *De magistro* (389) he argues that it is impossible to gain knowledge from testimony, since the mark of knowledge is an ‘inner episode’ of illumination which cannot be transmitted from one person to another, though a testimonial report may prompt its hearer to have this inner experience. In *De utilitate credendi* 11.25 (391), Augustine discusses a variety of issues related to testimony and the ethics of belief. His verdict is that testimony can be an appropriate (not to mention useful) source of belief, even though testimony isn’t a source of knowledge. In his *De libero arbitrio* (387/395), Augustine briefly canvasses an argument on which the “Foole” wishes his interlocutor to believe of the Foole that he has the “right spirit and is not hiding any insincerity or truculence” (2.2.5.14) when raising questions. But if default credibility is given to the Foole’s testimony, the Foole should grant credibility to the testimony of the apostles concerning God’s existence (2.2.5.15):¹⁰

⁸ See also the example recounted in *util. cred.* 4.10 of the young adult who dies before Augustine can ask him what he meant by what he said; the problem generally arises in obscure written texts (*util. cred.* 5.11).

⁹ A proximate testimonial report might also be supported by sense-perception, but we’ll leave that case aside.

¹⁰ In *util. cred.* 11.23 Augustine argues that a hearer’s belief in testimony might be morally ‘equitable’ (*aequius*) as a response to the trust the testifier has extended, given that the hearer is not directly acquainted with the contents of the testifier’s mind.

Quanto esset aequius, cum sibi de occultis animi sui quae ipse nosset uellet alterum credere qui non nosset, ut etiam ipse tantorum uiro- rum libris, qui se cum filio dei uixisse testatum litteris reliquerunt, esse deum crederet.

Since he wants another person to believe him about matters that are hidden in his own mind, how much more reasonable it would be for him also to believe God exists, on the basis of the books written by the great men who left behind their testament that they lived with the Son of God.

The argument isn't a keeper, though. In the context, Augustine is roughly interested in understanding or knowing that God exists, and he appears to doubt that testimony can be a source of knowledge (2.2.5.16).

By the time Augustine writes his *Confessiones* (397–401) his assessment of testimony has changed: he says now that he *knows* (*scire*) the identity of his parents on the basis of testimony.¹¹ A few years later, he claims in no uncertain terms that testimony *is* a source of knowledge. We are interested in the older Augustine's position, which he maintains in *ep.* 147.1.5 (413), *trin.* 15.12.21 (started 399; completed 422–426), and *ciu.* 11.3 (started 413; completed 427).

Before going on, it's worth speculating a bit on Augustine's change from his negative verdict on testimony-based knowledge in *De utilitate credendi*, *De magistro*, and *De libero arbitrio* to the positive verdict in his later works. The exclusion of testimony as a source of knowledge is likely connected to Augustine's wider epistemological commitments, which were shaped by his recent 'conversions' from Academic Skepticism to Platonism and thence to Christianity.¹² Although Augustine the Christian believed knowledge was possible, he was worried about skeptical challenges. In fact, Augustine's early thoughts on knowledge have a skeptical bent: he repeatedly rejects the deliverances of sense-perception, only endorsing knowledge of logical/mathematical truths, the existence of the phenomenal world, and how things appear, in the teeth of skeptical arguments (*acad.* 3.10.23–3.13.29). In *util. cred.* 11.25, he claims that knowledge ("understanding") requires "grasping something by the sure reason of the mind," a theme echoed in the *De magistro*; sense-perception doesn't contribute to knowledge. He had similar epistemological commitments in

¹¹ See *conf.* 6.5.7: "I maintained an unshakeable fixed belief about the identity of my parents from whom I sprang, and I could not know this had I not believed through hearing." Compare to Augustine's earlier discussion of his infancy: "Afterwards I began to smile, first in my sleep, then when awake. That at least is what I was told, and I believed it since that is what we see other infants doing" (1.6.8); "You have given each person the ability to put together things about himself on the basis of others, and even to believe many things about himself on the basis of the reports (*auctoritatibus*) of little old ladies" (1.6.10).

¹² See King [2005] for discussion of the latter 'conversion'.

other early works such as *Contra Academicos* and *Soliloquia* (both 386/387). Since testimony requires sense knowledge, it is unsurprising that Augustine didn't propose testimony as a source of knowledge in his early career. However, as he aged, he became less concerned with skeptical challenges. Take a passage from *ciu.* 19.18:

Credit sensibus in rei cuiusque euidencia, quibus per corpus animus utitur, quoniam miserabilis fallitur, qui numquam putat eis esse credendum. . . de quibusdam rebus, quas neque sensu neque ratione percepimus neque nobis per scripturam canonicam claruerunt nec per testes, quibus non credere absurdum est, in nostram notitiam peruenerunt, sine iusta reprehensione dubitamus.

[The City of God] believes the senses (by means of which the mind makes use of the body) as its evidence in any given case, since anyone who holds that the senses should not be believed is the more miserably in error. . . We may without just reproach have doubts regarding certain things: things we have not perceived either by sense or reason, nor which have been made clear to us by canonical Scriptures, nor have they become known to us through witnesses whom it would be ridiculous not to believe.

Why was the older Augustine less worried about testimony as a source of knowledge? We're unsure, but here are three possible (and non-exclusive) explanations for his change. (1) Augustine goes 'contextual'.¹³ At the end of his life, Augustine revisited his works, cataloguing them and commenting where he saw fit. On *De utilitate credendi* he offers the following remark (*Retractationes* 1.14.3):

Proprie quippe cum loquimur, id solum scire dicimus quod mentis firma ratione comprehendimus. Cum uero loquimur uerbis consuetudini aptioribus, sicut loquitur etiam Scriptura diuina, non dubitemus dicere scire nos et quod percipimus nostri corporis sensibus et quod fide dignis credimus testibus, dum tamen inter haec et illud quid distet intellegamus.

When we speak strictly, we say that we know only what we comprehend with the mind's firm reason. But when we speak with words that are more suitable to common usage, the way divine Scripture also speaks, we shouldn't hesitate to say that we know both what we perceive with the bodily senses and what we believe by our trusting worthy testifiers – although we still understand these two to be quite distinct.

The idea here is that the demands of strict usage and ordinary usage are quite different. We can truly say that Jones knows *p* on the basis of testimony when ordinary usage is in our mouths, but that's not so for strict usage. Perhaps Augustine adopted this view about use of the term 'knowledge' (*scire*). (2) The skeptics lose. Perhaps Augustine simply thought his earlier skeptical worries were misplaced because he had finally defeated the skeptical challenge.¹⁴

¹³ Coady [1992] 19 sketches the 'two usages' view of knowledge described here.

¹⁴ Augustine continues to offer arguments against the skeptics in his later works –

This victory enabled him to shift his attention from what could be doubted to what should be doubted, and eventually to conclude that, without apology, we really *do* know on the basis of sense-perception and testimony. (3) Augustine goes international. As a bishop active from the mid-390s, Augustine came to engage in a wide correspondence, both gaining and imparting wisdom in his epistolary exchanges. Perhaps not coincidentally, he comes to think testimony can be a source of knowledge.¹⁵

Now we will quickly sketch Augustine's wider epistemological position using these later texts, and then consider his answer to the epistemological question. These texts suggest that according to Augustine, all human knowledge has one of three sources: (a) the interior or mental sense, (b) the external or bodily senses, and (c) testimony. For instance, in *ep.* 147.1.3 Augustine distinguishes between seeing "with our bodily eyes, as we see the sun" and seeing "with the eyes of the mind, as everyone sees himself inwardly, when he sees himself living, wishing, seeking, knowing or not knowing." Both senses are affirmed as sources of knowledge, and testimony-based beliefs may also count as knowledge (*ep.* 147.3.8):

Constat igitur nostra scientia ex uisis rebus et creditis: sed in iis quae uidimus uel uidemus, nos ipsi testes sumus; in his autem quae credimus, aliis testibus mouemur ad fidem.

Our knowledge, then, consists of things seen and things believed. In the case of things we have seen or are seeing now, we ourselves are our own witnesses. In the case of things we believe, however, we are led to assent by the testimony of others.

The distinction is reiterated in *trin.* 15.12.21, where Augustine distinguishes between knowledge of what the mind "perceives through itself" and knowledge of what it "perceives through the senses of the body." Testimony is an additional source of knowledge. As he says, "we must confess that, not only the senses of our own bodies, but also those of other persons have added very much to our knowledge." In *ciu.* 11.3, Augustine says that "we can have knowledge of objects which are not remote from our senses," through either the "interior" sense of the mind or the "exterior" senses of the body. He then addresses testimony:¹⁶

notably, his 'anticipation' of Descartes in *trin.* 15.12.21. But perhaps this is to hammer the nail in the coffin. Here's what is remarkable about this chapter: Augustine begins by engaging the skeptics but goes on to validate testimony as a source of knowledge. Given that he ends up with testimony, he must have thought his worries about skepticism had been finally laid to rest.

¹⁵ See the discussion in O'Donnell [2005] 91–101.

¹⁶ In *ciu.* 11.3, Augustine does not explicitly say that testimony is a source of knowledge in general (though he doesn't deny it). Instead, he says only that testimony in

Ea, quae remota sunt a sensibus nostris, quoniam nostro testimonio scire non possumus, de his alios testes requirimus eisque credimus, a quorum sensibus remota esse uel fuisse non credimus.

Since we cannot know by the testimony of our senses objects that are remote from the senses, we require the testimony of others in respect of them, and we rely on these from whose senses we do not believe the objects in question to be, or to have been, remote.

These sources are typical; many more examples could be found throughout Augustine's writings, from earliest to latest. In what follows we'll leave aside the details of (a) and (b),¹⁷ and turn our focus to (c).

The mature Augustine – henceforth we'll drop this reminder – proposes two distinct models according to which a hearer can acquire testimony-based knowledge. The difference between the two models lies in the testifier's relation to the *testimonial ground*, that is, the places, people, and events that the testimony is about. His first model, which we'll call the *standard model*, requires that the testifier know the testimonial ground. His second model in contrast does not require that the testifier knows the testimonial ground; we'll call it the *secondary model*.

On the standard model the testifier has knowledge of the testimonial ground. This knowledge may come either through the bodily senses or the mental sense. Consider first a case involving testimony based on the senses. If the testimonial ground is the Sack of Rome in August 410, the testifier might have visited Rome, taken in the sights, pillaged and plundered, sought refuge in a church, whatever. Augustine also says that testimony-based knowledge requires that the hearer have instances of sense-perception and mental perception (*ep.* 147.3.9). When the testifier's report (say, that Rome was pillaged in August 410) is perceived and comprehended by the hearer, the testifier's sense knowledge is transformed into the hearer's testimony-based knowledge.

Such cases are straightforward. More interesting is a case that falls under the standard model but which does not require that a testifier have sense-perception of the testimonial ground in order to come to know it. (Remember, the standard model requires knowledge but not necessarily sense knowledge.) In the case at hand, Augustine considers a testifier's report that "Christ rose from the dead," where the testifier is one of Christ's disciples (*ep.* 147.3.9). Augustine writes (*ep.* 147.4.10):

canonical scripture is a source of knowledge. But his concern with this particular strain of testimony is likely due to the context, and the point holds generally.

¹⁷ Augustine's theory of knowledge is explored in Nash [1969] and Bubacz [1981]. It isn't clear how to combine the mental mechanics Augustine lays out in his later works, such as his *De Trinitate*, with his account of testimonial knowledge. Here we confine ourselves to the task of analyzing just what the latter account is.

Resurrectio autem Christi praeterita est, quam nec illi uiderunt homines qui tunc fuerunt. Nam qui uiderunt uiuentem Christum quem uiderant morientem, ipsam tamen resurrectionem cum fieret non uiderunt, sed eam certissime crediderunt, uidendo et tangendo uiuum quem nouerant mortuum. Nos totum credimus, et quod resurrexerit. . .

Now the Resurrection of Christ is in the past. Even the men who lived at that time did not see it: those who saw the living Christ and who had seen him dying, nevertheless did not see the actual Resurrection – yet they believed it most firmly by seeing and touching the living Christ whom they had known as dead. We for our part believe that He rose again. . .

This is puzzling. At least this much is clear, however: the primary testifier's report is that Christ rose from the dead, and Augustine says the testifier didn't have sense-perception of the event.¹⁸ Yet Augustine thinks a hearer can have testimony-based knowledge in this case. The puzzle, then, is to figure out just how Augustine thinks the testifier can know that Christ rose from the dead. A couple of clues are available. The testifier has sense-perception both (a) that Christ is dead at one time and (b) that Christ is living a few days thereafter.

We conjecture that Augustine may have thought the testifier *inferred* that Christ rose from the dead on the basis of (a) and (b). First, assume that the testifier's sense-perceptions of the states of affairs in (a) and (b) are sufficient for knowledge. Second, assume that Augustine has a rudimentary 'closure' principle at hand according to which if a person knows both that x and that x entails y , then he can know that y on the basis of deduction. Since the testifier knows both that (a) and (b) and that these items of knowledge entail that Christ rose from the dead, then the testifier can also know that Christ rose.¹⁹ In this way, it is possible to explain how Augustine may have thought the testifier has mental knowledge – understanding or 'grasping by the mind' – that Christ rose from the dead without sense knowledge that Christ rose. Speculation aside, Augustine's proposal appears to be that a testifier's mental knowledge that p can be transformed into testimony-based knowledge that p .

According to the standard model, then, a transfer from testifier to hearer

¹⁸ Compare Augustine's remarks in *ep. 147.1.6*: "Adam was created without parents, and Christ was born of a virgin, suffered, and rose again. These events were accomplished in the body and surely could have been seen in the body had we then been present." Augustine says here that a person could have had sense-perception of the resurrection. This doesn't contradict his claim that the testifier did not have sense-perception of that event. For according to Augustine, if the testifier had been at the right place at the right time, she would have had sense-perception of the event. It's just a matter of fact, however, that no one was in the tomb.

¹⁹ Augustine might add that they could have received testimony from Christ himself concerning the resurrection.

yields knowledge only if the following conditions, individually necessary but not jointly sufficient, are met:

(ST-1) The hearer has sense knowledge of the testifier's report that p ²⁰

(ST-2) The testifier has sense knowledge or mental knowledge that p

(ST-3) The hearer has mental knowledge of the report that p and also believes that p ²¹

The standard model is reminiscent of a claim made by various contemporary epistemologists, namely, that a hearer knows p on the basis of a testifier's report that p only if the testifier knows that p . For example, Robert Audi remarks: "(I) cannot (testimonially) give you knowledge that p without knowing that p . . . Testimonial based knowledge is received by transmission and so depends on the attester's knowing that p ."²² This is a putative necessary condition on the transfer of testimony, and Alvin Plantinga, Tyler Burge, and others have approved of it.

This necessary condition has been criticized by Jennifer Lackey and Peter Graham.²³ The criticism consists in cases where a hearer comes to know p on the basis of a testifier's report even though the testifier doesn't know p .

Since Augustine's standard model does not represent an attempt to provide necessary conditions on all cases of testimonial transfer, he can avoid these counterexamples. What's noteworthy is that Augustine recognizes that a testifier need not know that p in order for a hearer to know it on the basis of the testifier's report. He offers a subtle example of his own (*mag.* 13.41):²⁴

²⁰ See *ep.* 147.3.9: "He sees the man whose voice he hears, and he assigns the voice to things he has seen. . ." Among other things, this condition requires the reception of a testimonial report as necessary for testimonial knowledge – if you don't hear someone say it, you can't (testimonially) know it.

²¹ Augustine says that the hearer must "see in his mind whatever he understands to be signified through the shapes and sounds of the letters" (*ep.* 147.3.9). Augustine's reference to 'shapes and sounds' here is meant to underline the point that testimonial knowledge requires *testimony*, as noted in ST-1.

²² Audi [1997] 410.

²³ Lackey [1999] and Graham [2000].

²⁴ The Epicurean in Augustine's example is like Mrs. Smith in Lackey [1999] section III. Augustine describes this as the "third kind of error" that can happen in interpreting a text, namely "when one understands something true from another's writing although the author did not so understand it": *util. cred.* 4.10, parallel to the start of 5.11. Charity often leads us to this 'error', which is commendable, and often the sentiment improves on the author's intent (*util. cred.* 5.11). As an example, Augustine imagines someone who reads Epicurus's praise of continence and thereby comes to believe (falsely) that Epicurus held the highest good to be virtue and thus should not be blamed – an error, but a human and even praiseworthy

Nam plerumque scit illa, quae dicta sunt, eo ipso nesciente, qui dixit; uelut si quisquam Epicureis credens et mortalem animam putans eas rationes, quae de immortalitate eius a prudentioribus tractatae sunt, eloquatur illo audiente, qui spiritalia contueri potest, iudicat iste uera eum dicere. At ille, qui dicit, utrum uera dicat ignorat, immo etiam falsissima existimat, num igitur putandus est ea docere, quae nescit? Atqui isdem uerbis utitur, quibus uti etiam sciens posset.

Often [the student] knows what is said even when the speaker doesn't know it. For example, if anyone believing the Epicureans and thinking that the soul is mortal should set forth the arguments for its immortality (discussed by more prudent thinkers) in the hearing of someone able to look upon spiritual things, he judges that the speaker is stating truths. Yet the speaker, for his part, is not aware that he's stating truths. Instead, he holds them to be completely false. Should it then be thought that he teaches what he doesn't know? Yet he uses the very same words that someone who does know also could use.

Augustine's reference to "someone able to look upon spiritual things" identifies the hearer as a non-epicurean, or at least as someone who is not dogmatically committed to materialism, and hence open to the argument being recounted. Now it's important to be clear on what the hearer's judgment is. The hearer is listening to not just any discourse, but to an *argument* – and that makes all the difference.²⁵ Indisputably, the premisses are known by testimony. The epistemic status of the conclusion, though, might be taken in at least three ways. Here's one: it *isn't* testimonial knowledge at all, it's inferential knowledge; the hearer knows the conclusion on the basis of the arguments he hears.²⁶ The second interpretation is this. The hearer's judgment *is* testimonial knowledge; the hearer treats the conclusion like the premisses,

one. Yet this example is puzzling. There is nothing particularly commendable in thinking that Epicurus held a commendable view. What is more, the reader does not in fact wind up believing a truth. However, if we emend Augustine's text in 4.10 from *illum summum bonum* to *illud summum bonum*, the puzzle disappears. Augustine is then saying that the reader comes to the judgment that the highest good itself is virtue, a view for which he, the reader, should not be blamed, as it is a praiseworthy view. If the text be so emended, it is exactly parallel to the Epicurean example from *De magistro*.

²⁵ The testifier also draws an inference in the case of Christ's resurrection, a point we noted but did not explore earlier.

²⁶ Our thanks to C. A. J. Coady, Peter Graham, and an anonymous referee for suggesting this interpretation. Although it fits well with the overall aim of *De magistro*, it is striking that Augustine does *not* say here that the hearer consults the inner Teacher, a claim he defers to the end of the dialogue; instead he follows the example with cases of lying, mishearing, slips of the tongue, and the like, each a challenge to the possibility of testimonial knowledge. See King [1998] for further discussion.

namely as a report, and thereby knows the conclusion. A third interpretation combines elements of the preceding. The hearer's knowledge is derived from testimonial reports, and thus counts as testimonial knowledge, though perhaps in an extended sense.

Each interpretation has its merits. The first respects the active contribution of the hearer in reaching a conclusion. The second, though it disregards the fact that the testifier recounts an argument, is clearly an instance of testimonial knowledge. And the third seems to get it right: the premisses are known by testimony, the conclusion is drawn from the premisses rather than directly from the testifier.

We plump for the third interpretation. The hearer, in our view, doesn't contribute anything of substance to the conclusion merely by deducing it from the premisses. For Augustine, as for modern meaning-holists, inference is a kind of interpretation. A conclusion is a kind of 'interpretation' of the premisses: just as your knowledge of grammatical rules enables you to parse the syntax of what you hear, and thus to grasp it, so too your knowledge of logical rules enables you to draw the consequences of what you hear, and thus to grasp the conclusion. Consider a toy example. Suppose Jones tells you a story about Billy the Duck and Jenny the Duck. You quite naturally come to think there are two ducks in Jones's story. It is clear that you know this on the basis of what Jones has said, that is, through his testimony. Logical inference is thus a form of interpretation, a point borne out by the common informal description of the conclusion as "not saying anything more" than the premisses.

Yet Augustine goes further: he recognizes other mechanisms that may be at work in belief-acquisition. In his *De mendacio* (394/5) he puts forward cases where the testifier's reliability is taken into account by the hearer. One case has Ted (the testifier) deliberately asserting a falsehood so that Herb (the hearer) will thereby come to believe the truth (*mend.* 4.4):

Unum qui scit aut putat se falsum dicere, et ideo dicit ne fallat; uelut si aliquam uiam no-uerit obsideri a latronibus, et timens ne per illam pergat homo cuius saluti prospicit, et eum scit sibi non credere, dicat eam uiam non habere latrones, ad hoc ut illac non eat, dum ideo credit latrones ibi esse, quia ille dixit non ibi esse, cui non credere statuit, mendacem putans.

Consider a man [=Ted] who knows or thinks he is saying something false, and says it deliberately in order to not mislead someone [=Herb]. For instance, suppose that Ted knows a certain road is beset by robbers. He is afraid that Herb – for whose safety he is concerned – might take that road. But Ted knows that Herb mistrusts him, so he tells Herb that that road has no robbers in order that Herb not take it, since Herb will think there are robbers there precisely because Ted has told him there are none, and Herb is resolved not to believe Ted, thinking him a liar.

Herb comes to believe not what Ted says but the very opposite. Ted has tricked Herb into believing the truth, since he anticipates Herb's application of a 'belief-flipping' rule to what he says. Nevertheless, Herb believes as he does precisely because of what Ted says, and in this case he believes something true: he has testimonial knowledge. Flipping the belief is an interpretive rule Herb applies to Ted's utterances, just a particular way of understanding what Ted says. (Augustine would say that parsing syntax, drawing inferences, flipping content, and the like are all ways of "grasping signs"; see his *De magistro*.) Any number of such interpretive strategies are possible, which allow us to figure out what someone is saying. For Augustine, what it is to receive testimony always involves this sort of interpretive activity.²⁷ Testimonial knowledge is therefore even possible when the testifier does not believe what he says.

The upshot of Augustine's discussion is that a hearer can gain knowledge by testimony even when the testifier doesn't know the truth of what he said. This is the heart of the secondary model. It captures the subtleties of Augustine's view by weakening ST-2, the condition that the testifier know that *p*. According to the secondary model, the transfer from testifier to hearer

²⁷ There are subtleties Augustine does not pause to explore. If the hearer interprets the testifier's report, what if anything is the fact of the matter about 'what is said'? Has Jones in fact testified that there are two ducks, in virtue of his separate testimonies about each duck? Does a testifier report the conclusion if he utters only the premisses? These difficulties are a by-product of the hearer's interpretive activity, and thus affect contemporary analyses of testimony as well. Lackey [2006] addresses some of these issues with her distinction between speaker's testimony and hearer's testimony; she concludes by formulating a definition of testimony that relies on the 'information' a communicative act can reasonably be taken to convey – a notion broad enough to encompass Augustine's concerns about interpretation.

yields knowledge only when the following conditions, individually necessary but not jointly sufficient, are met:

- (SC-1) The hearer has sense knowledge of the testifier's report that p
- (SC-2) p is true
- (SC-3) The hearer has mental knowledge of the report that p and also believes that p

The first and last conditions remain the same, but the testifier's knowledge has dropped out of the picture in the secondary model as not being essential to whether the hearer knows p on the basis of the testifier's report that p . The standard model is designedly more restrictive, allowing only knowledge to be transferred from testifier to hearer.

3. THE DOXASTIC QUESTION

In what circumstances is it appropriate or proper to believe on the basis of testimony? We'll argue that Augustine proposes that a hearer should believe a testifier's report unless it seems to the hearer either that the testifier or the report is untrustworthy. It will require some work to see why.

As pointed out above, Augustine thinks that testimony-based knowledge requires a connection between the testimonial ground and the hearer through a testifier's report. The doxastic question concerns the circumstances in which a particular relationship between the testifier and the hearer is appropriate. Before we get to Augustine's answer to the doxastic question, we'll take a detour to *De fide rerum inuisibilium* (400) and *ep.* 147, where we'll examine a few issues related to the testifier-hearer relationship that lurk in the background.

Augustine criticizes "those who seem to be opposed to believing what they cannot see" (*f. inuis.* 1.1). One of his purposes is to remind his opponent that there are many things which cannot be perceived with the bodily senses but which are appropriately believed. A natural point of departure for Augustine is the problem of other minds. The problem of other minds is the worry about how (and whether) a person can be entitled to believe that other bodies have minds. In *f. inuis.* 1.2-3, it isn't presented as a *problem* to solve, but as a *challenge* to an (unnamed) opponent. We'll call the opponent Claire. Claire's view is that it is *only* appropriate to believe something on the basis of bodily or mental perception – she claims that belief should be apportioned to what is perceived. Augustine argues that Claire's view is inconsistent with the attitudes involved in friendship. It's not that friendship solves the problem of other minds – it's that one can't countenance friendship if belief must be limited to what is perceived.²⁸ He begins his argument with a question: "Tell

²⁸ This is a recurring theme in Augustine, sounded as early as *util. cred.* 10.23-24

me, I ask you, with what eyes do you see your friend's will [*voluntas*] towards you?" (*f. inuis.* 1.2). The answer is that Claire can't perceive her friend's thoughts or affections. Augustine then points out that since Claire desires the affection of her friend, she believes something unperceived.²⁹ The reason appears to be that Claire's desiring the affection of her friend presupposes that she believes her friend has an interior life.

Augustine's argument may have scampered past too quickly, so let's slow it down. Here's the argument stated as a *reductio*:

- (1) If Claire believes x , then she perceives x . [assumption]
- (2) It is not the case that Claire perceives her friend has affections.
- (3) *Therefore*, it is not the case that Claire believes her friend has affections. [1, 2, *modus tollens*]
- (4) Claire desires the affection of her friend.
- (5) If Claire desires the affection of her friend, then she believes her friend has affections.
- (6) Claire believes her friend has affections. [4, 5, *modus ponens*]
- (7) *Therefore*, Claire believes her friend has affections and it is not the case that she believes her friend has affections. [3, 6, conjunction introduction]

Therefore: It is not the case that (1).

Augustine objects to (2) on Claire's behalf: "Perhaps you will say that you see the will [*voluntas*] of another through his deeds..." (*f. inuis.* 1.2). This is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it allusion to Augustine's "argument from analogy to other minds."³⁰ The feature of the argument used here is that a friend's interior life is revealed or represented by his actions or words. Imagine that Claire's friend buys her a recording of Bach's *Two and Three Part Inventions* and writes her a postcard from Arizona. Assuming that the friend's actions and words reveal his interior life, Claire can believe he has affection toward her. This link between the friend's interior life and his exterior behavior entails that Claire's belief about her friend is formed on the basis of sense-perception. Or so goes the objection.

In reply, Augustine says that perceiving actions or words doesn't entail that Claire perceives a friend's interior life; accordingly, she would still be-

(noted above).

²⁹ See *f. inuis.* 1.2: "But, if you do not see it, how do you, on your part, return his loving kindness, if you do not believe what you cannot see?"

³⁰ See *trin.* 8.6.9; Matthews [1992] Chapter 9; Matthews [2005] Chapter 7. Augustine's solution to the problem of other minds isn't our concern; what's critical here is that he doesn't buy into Claire's restrictive assumption (1).

lieve something unperceived. The reason – a straightforward explanation of (2) – is as follows (*f. inuis. 1.2*):

Non enim uoluntas illa color est aut figura, ut oculis ingeratur; uel sonus aut cantilena, ut auribus illabatur; aut uero tua est, ut tui cordis affectione sentiatur. Restat itaque, ut nec uisa, nec audita, nec apud te intus conspecta credatur...

The will is not colour or figure that may be impressed upon the eyes; nor is it a sound or a song that may strike upon the ears; nor, indeed, is it yours to be felt by the affection of your heart. The upshot is that although [the will] is not seen or heard or grasped inwardly by you, it is believed.

Augustine concludes that as long as Claire apportions belief to what is perceived and has a friend, she will believe something unperceived.

Details of Augustine’s argument aside, what’s to stop Claire from ditching her friend to save her view? Appealing to prudential grounds, Augustine says that giving up friendship is not a viable option: if Claire and others do not believe things that are unperceived, there will be “dreadful confusion” (*f. inuis. 2.4*).³¹ He imagines the result of people apportioning belief only to what is perceived and claims that attitudes of “mutual charity” and “good will” would cease. For example, a husband and wife would lack affection towards one another; parents would love children less; kindness would not be expressed between friends. (See *f. inuis. 2.4*.)

In order to keep such problems at bay, Augustine recommends an ethic of belief whereby a person ought to have attitudes of charity and good will towards others (as opposed to a “faithless lack of reverence”). These attitudes enable a person to believe what can’t be perceived in others: affection, kindness, honesty, and the like. Augustine points out that maintaining charity and good will towards others doesn’t presuppose that a person must first test or evaluate others to determine whether such attitudes are appropriate. Take some examples. Imagine that Audrey arranges circumstances so that her banker friend, Paul, believes he can embezzle her savings without getting caught. Or imagine that Audrey writes Paul into her will and goes climbing on a particularly dangerous precipice. She lets Paul hold the rope (and the will). Suppose that Paul neither cheats nor kills Audrey. Using these sorts of tests, Audrey might gather evidence concerning Paul’s interior life and thereby come to believe he’s honest and trustworthy. Augustine emphasizes, however, that none of this is required, for a person ought to “believe in the hearts of friends though these hearts be not yet truly tried” (*f. inuis. 2.3*).

Take stock. Augustine has argued that friendship demands belief in things

³¹ See *f. inuis. 3.4*: “If we do not believe what we cannot see, then human society, its harmony perishing, will not endure” (*Si ergo non credentibus nobis quae videre non possumus, ipsa humana societas, concordia pereunte, non stabit*).

unseen, as the case of Claire reveals. Furthermore, friendship doesn't require gathering reasons and evidence for a friend's trustworthiness, as we see with Audrey and Paul. Indeed, friendship militates against trying the hearts of friends: to call into question a friend's trustworthiness is to be no friend at all. But friendship is central to christian charity, and, along with a general commendation of "good will," Augustine recommends we have it toward all. Briefly: we should extend the privileges of friendship even to strangers, giving their testimony the same default epistemic status.

We'll now consider a discussion in *ep.* 147.2.7 that bears directly upon testimony-based belief and Augustine's ethic of belief. Imagine that a testifier reports to a hearer that he once watched a fish consume a small child. The hearer asks whether the testifier is being honest. The testifier says he's honest and the hearer has no reason to doubt it. Imagine a second case in which the hearer receives the same report; but, alternatively, the testifier fumbles to get his story straight and flip-flops from talking about a fish consuming a small child to a small child consuming a fish. The hearer consequently doubts the testifier's trustworthiness. (Indeed, the hearer thinks a fish story has been told.) Augustine submits judgments concerning these cases. In situations like the first, when it seems to the hearer that the testifier is trustworthy, the hearer should believe the report. But whenever it seems to the hearer that the testifier is untrustworthy, as in the second case, the hearer shouldn't believe the report. Discussing a particular testifier's report, Augustine says (*ep.* 147.2.7):

<i>Si eum mentiri existimo, non credo, etsi forte, ut dicat, ita sit. Creduntur ergo illa quae absunt a sensibus nostris, si uidentur idoneum quod eis testimonium perhibetur.</i>	If I hold him to be lying, I don't believe him, even though perhaps it is as he says. Therefore, we believe things that are not present to our senses as long as what the testimony says seems appropriate.
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Augustine's proposal may be tidied up and packaged as an answer to the doxastic question. To start with, Augustine's ethic of belief requires a hearer to maintain a default position of charity and good will towards others. This requirement obligates the hearer to believe what a testifier reports, unless it seems to the hearer that the testifier is untrustworthy. Second, there are two ways in which a testifier's report may claim something so that it "seems appropriate" to a hearer. Take first a case where a testifier has been tested or evaluated in a variety of situations and has been determined to be generally trustworthy. In another case, the general trustworthiness of a testifier is undetermined, but a particular report is confirmed and supported by additional evidence (either testimonial or non-testimonial).³² These two cases raise a

³² Augustine remarks that certain reports are "confirmed by evidence that is consistent and convincing" (*trin.* 15.12.21: *indiciis consonis constantibusque firmantur*).

distinction between a testifier's trustworthiness, and the trustworthiness of a report. Augustine seems to run these two together; but we won't.

It's now possible to express his answer to the doxastic question perspicuously: a hearer should believe a testifier's report unless it seems to the hearer either that the testifier or the report is untrustworthy.

4. AUGUSTINE AND THE TRADITION

Although Augustine's view of testimony has gone unappreciated, that isn't to say it has nothing in common with the tradition of thought on testimony. His approach to the doxastic question is similar to H. H. Price's. Price aims to motivate the policy that we should believe what we are told, unless or until we have reasons to doubt it. Price appeals to prudential grounds: accepting this policy, he says, is socially expedient or even socially indispensable.³³

Augustine also finds a place within a central disagreement among those who think about testimony. In contemporary and early modern discussions, there is a well-recognized divide on the issue of whether non-testimonial evidence is required, at least in principle, to yield testimonial-based knowledge.³⁴ Some philosophers claim that a hearer's testimony-based knowledge (or, often, justification) depends upon the hearer possessing further independent evidence or reasons, that is, non-testimonial evidence. Accordingly, all testimony-based knowledge is reducible to non-testimony-based knowledge. This position has been represented by Hume and Bertrand Russell, and more recently by Elizabeth Fricker; it is called *reductionism*:

(R) A hearer's testimony-based belief that p is knowledge only if the hearer can offer sufficient non-testimonial evidence in support of p .

Others, such as Reid, C. A. J. Coady, and Peter Graham have claimed that a hearer can have testimony-based knowledge without possessing evidence or reasons that are independent of any instance of testimony. This position has been called *defaultism*, *credulism*, or *Reidianism*:

(D) A hearer's testimony-based belief that p is knowledge even if the hearer cannot offer any non-testimonial evidence in support of p .

Most philosophers who think about testimony tend toward either (R) or (D). So where does Augustine fall?

It should be clear by now that Augustine has something like (D) in mind. He gives examples of testimony-based beliefs that count as knowledge for which no sufficient non-testimonial evidence could be offered. For instance,

³³ See Price [1969] and Webb [1993].

³⁴ See Coady [1992] Chapters 4–7 and Pritchard [2004].

in the *De fide rerum inuisibilium* and elsewhere he says that a testimonial report concerning the identity of a hearer's parents is what we've called distant, that is, testimony that cannot be supported using non-testimonial evidence.³⁵ Even the testifier is "unable to demonstrate the fact because the event is already in the past" (*f. inuis. 2.4*). Yet Augustine thinks a hearer can know, for example, the identity of his parents through distant testimonial report. Consequently, Augustine denies that a hearer's testimony-based knowledge must be supported by non-testimonial evidence, as reductionism would have it. Augustine therefore maintains defaultism.

Augustine develops a position in the epistemology of testimony that is often called 'Reidian'. According to Reid, any assertion is worthy of our trust until shown otherwise. Reid thought this account of trust in testimony was correct since God has made us "social creatures" by putting in us two principles: one of veracity, another of credulity. "The first of these principles is, a propensity to speak truth, and to use the signs of language, so as to convey our real sentiments" (*Inquiry* 6.24:193) and the second is "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us" (194). We hope it is apparent that if Augustine's account is given a fair hearing, and we take temporal priority seriously, we might do well to call Reid and his ilk 'Augustinians' instead.³⁶

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³⁵ See the distinction in §1.

³⁶ We would like to thank C. A. J. Coady and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments, as well as an audience at the Université de Sherbrooke (Fall 2005), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for support.

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