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# Book Review

## *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* by C. A. J. Coady

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Coady, C. A. J. (1992). ***Testimony: A Philosophical Study.*** Oxford: Clarendon Press. Pp. x, 1-315. ISBN 0-19-824786-9. Cloth. US $39.95.

With a few noticeable exceptions, philosophers in epistemology, logic, and philosophy of language have generally ignored testimony. Empiricist epistemologists have focussed on the individual knower's sensory perceptions and ignored information gained from what others say. Logicians generally discuss testimony briefly in connection with *ad hominem* arguments, pointing out that attacking a person's character or credentials is not a fallacy if we are evaluating testimony rather than argument. For while argument must be evaluated on its own merits (validity and soundness), testimony must be evaluated based on the competence and honesty of the witness.

In *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, C. A. J. Coady seeks to put an end to philosophers' unjustified neglect of testimony. He argues that trusting another's word is "fundamental to the very idea of serious cognitive activity" (p. i). Coady divides his presentation into five sections: I. The Problematic, II. The Tradition, III. The Solution, IV. The Puzzles, and V. The Applications.

**Section I. The Problematic** explores the extent, depth, and inevitability of our reliance on what others tell us. Most epistemologists have either ignored testimony altogether or rejected it summarily. Coady argues that this tradition of neglect is unjustified and harmful because our reliance on testimony is crucially important to both our ordinary beliefs and to theoretical pursuits, such as history, psychology, and physics. Psychology and medicine, for example, rely heavily on subjects' verbal reports. Moreover, experts and researchers in all the sciences use the testimony of other researchers.

Coady offers two primary reasons for epistemologists' neglect of testimony: the individualist ideology of such thinkers as Descartes and Locke, and the association of testimony with Medieval reliance on the opinions of authorities.

Coady sketches four theoretical responses to realizing the extent of our reliance on testimony.

1. *the Puritan Response*: Testimonial beliefs are not known; therefore, knowledge is much rarer than we think (Plato & Collingwood).
2. *the Reductive Response*: Testimonial beliefs are known and inferentially justified (Hume, Russell, W. K. Clifford & J. L. Mackie).
3. *the Fundamentalist Response*: Testimonial beliefs are known and non-inferentially justified or basic (Thomas Reid).
4. *the End-of-Epistemology Response*: Testimonial beliefs are not inferential, and positive epistemology,

i.e., foundationalism, is a radical mistake (Quine).

Coady's list embodies the questionable assumption that foundationalism is the only plausible theory of the structure of justification and knowledge. Coady sees Quine as signaling the end of epistemology by proclaiming the failure of foundationalism. Coady wants to preserve epistemology by defending foundationalism. But if foundationalism is not the only option, then its alleged death need not mean the end of positive epistemology. Indeed, contemporary American epistemologists have offered strong defenses of two other theories: coherentism (Keith Lehrer, Larry BonJour, and Lynn Hankinson Nelson) and contextualism (David Annis and Helen Longino). Later, I shall argue that Coady's ignoring these alternatives to foundationalism leads to serious confusion. He compares himself to Reid, yet gives arguments that seem more appropriate for a coherentist (or perhaps even a contextualist). Further confusion arises because traditional foundationalism assumes an individualist approach which Coady rejects.

Coady defines two concepts of testimony: formal or legal testimony and natural or everyday testimony.

Formal Testimony [FT] has the following marks:

(a) It is a form of evidence.

(b) It is constituted by persons *A* offering their remarks as evidence so that we are invited to accept *p* because *A* says that *p*.

(c) The person offering the remarks is in a position to do so, i.e. he has the relevant authority, competence, or credentials.

(d) The testifier has been given a certain status in the inquiry by being formally acknowledged as a witness and by giving his evidence with due ceremony.

(e) As a specification of (c) within English law and proceedings influenced by it, the testimony is normally required to be firsthand (i.e. not hearsay).

(f) As a corollary of (a) the testifier's remarks should be relevant to a disputed or unresolved question and should be directed to those who are in need of evidence on the matter (pp. 32-33).

I find FT condition (f) misleading. Given the possibilities of epistemic overdetermination and counterevidence, there may be times during the court proceedings when the jury already has enough evidence to reach a verdict and so is not really "in need of evidence on the matter." I would modify (f) to state: the testifier's remarks ... should be directed to those who must evaluate the evidence on the matter to reach a verdict. I am also confused about the status of FT (a) - (f). Coady refers to them as "marks of formal testimony." This characterization is vague. Are they individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for FT, or are they something else, such as Wittgensteinian criteria? Mark (e) concerns what is "normally required" and so seems to be something less than a necessary condition.

Two additional marks which Coady excludes from his definition of FT are (g) creditability or sincerity and (h) corroboration. He excludes (g) creditability because insincere testimony is still testimony and because a sincerity condition is not unique to testimony. He rejects (h) corroboration because although ancient Roman Law required it, British Law does not.

Having defined Formal Testimony [FT], Coady turns to his primary concern: Natural Testimony [NT]. Here, he finds parallels with FT conditions (a), (b), (c) and (f), but not with (d) and (e). He defines Natural Testimony [NT] as follows: A speaker S testifies by making some statement p if and only if:

(1) His stating that *p* is evidence that *p* and is offered as evidence that *p*.

(2) *S* has the relevant competence, authority, or credentials to state truly that *p*.

(3) *S*'s statement that *p* is relevant to some disputed or unresolved question (which may, or may not be, *p*?) and is directed to those who are in need of evidence on the matter (p. 42).

The two competency conditions FT (c) and NT (2) differ noticeably. FT (c) requires that the person offering the remarks be in a position to do so. NT (2) seems stronger, for it requires S to be in a position "to state truly that *p*." This apparent change in the competency condition is confusing. NT conditions should be weaker than FT conditions, not stronger. Requiring *S* to be competent to state truly that *p* seems too strong. Coady wants to allow that so long as *S*'s remarks conform to probability and explanatory conditions such as those spelled out by Achinstein (*The Nature of Explanation*, Oxford, 1983), *S* has provided evidence for *p* even if *p* turns out to be false (pp. 44-45). I suggest replacing NT (2) with what I will call NT (2)*: *S* has the relevant competence, authority, or credentials to state justifiedly that *p* (or to provide evidence that *p*).

Another problem with competency conditions FT (c) and NT (2) is the implicit inclusion of sincerity. Coady excluded a sincerity condition from FT for reasons that also apply to NT. Yet, in discussing NT (2) he explicitly discusses trust, honesty, and deceit. This confusion is clarified by his earlier remark, "I argued against the inclusion of a credit condition in our definition of formal testimony but the cases of the insane and the very immature [young children] suggest that *a capacity for sincerity* might very well be part of the credentials we require under condition (c)" (p. 36). Now, while I agree that the *capacity for sincerity* may be included in competence, I believe Coady should supplement his definitions of FT and NT with definitions of *felicitous* testimony which include a sincerity condition. When we evaluate a witness, we must evaluate both her competence and her sincerity. Coady's initial analysis should prepare the way for such evaluation.

Indeed, I would prefer a somewhat more radical revision: constructing three definitions of "natural testimony" that parallel the definitions of "argument," "valid argument," and "sound argument." "Natural testimony" would include only NT (1) and (3) and would, thus, require neither competency nor sincerity. "Valid" natural testimony would require NT (2)* competence, but not sincerity; and "sound" natural testimony would require both NT (2)* competence and sincerity. While I support Coady's using legal testimony and Austinian philosophy of language to illuminate certain aspects of natural testimony, I believe my "critical thinking" approach might prove more useful. It would eliminate some of the confusions Coady encounters and could also incorporate insights from the law and from Austin.

In **Section II. The Tradition**, Coady explores past philosophical writings on testimony by Hume, Price, Russell, and Reid. His analysis reveals the individualist emphasis which gave rise to the idea of "autonomous knowledge." Hume, Price, and Russell all begin with the problem of how an individual with perception, memory, and reasoning can determine whether reports are sufficiently reliable to count as knowledge and, thus, extend her very restricted knowledge base.

*Chapter 4. Testimony, Observation, and the Reductive Approach*, examines two versions of the Reductionist Thesis [RT]. The first is David Hume's view [RT-H] that testimony reduces to inductive inference that reduces to observation. Hume maintains that we believe testimony because we humans as a group are accus-

tomed to finding conformity between testimony and reality (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford, 1957, p. 113). Coady argues that RT-H is viciously circular and must, therefore, be rejected. In contrast to Hume, J. L. Mackie bases his view [RT-M] not on the observations of humans as a group, but on the observations of the "autonomous knower" ["The Possibility of Innate Knowledge," *Proc. of the Aristotelian Society* (1970), 254]. Mackie's autonomous knower is someone who relies on testimony only when he has checked the witness's credibility. Coady rejects RT-M because it is false that individuals do this amount of credibility checking (p. 82).

Coady rejects both versions of reductionism. For him, testimonial beliefs are basic: they cannot be reduced to inference and observation. Some counter this with the fact that observation sometimes leads us to reject testimony. Coady rightly argues that this fact does not prove that testimony reduces to observation. In opposition to it, he presents two other facts:

1. One testimony can lead me to reject another without appealing to personal observation.
2. Testimony sometimes leads us to reject an observation, e.g. as hallucinatory (p. 97).

Thus, Coady here argues that it is still an open question whether testimony is reducible to observation.

In *Chapter 5. Deciding on Testimony*, Coady presents H. H. Price's view from lecture 5 of *Belief* (London, 1969). Price argues that testimony is an important source of knowledge about a wide range of things: geography, history, one's own age and birthday, etc. Our underlying assumption about testimony in the great majority of cases is "(A) What there is said to be (or to have been) there is (or was) more often than not" (p. 102). Although (A) looks like an inductive generalization, it cannot be adequately supported by individual observation alone (pp. 102-104). (A) is more like a maxim or methodological rule: either (B) believe what you are told by others unless or until you have reasons for doubting it or (C) conduct your thoughts and your actions as if A were true (p. 104).

Price defends B/C as epistemically expedient in that often we must either rely on testimony or suspend judgement. Coady compares Price's argument to Pascal's wager and constructs the following Testimony Wager.

| Consequence Matrix: | S1<br>A True | S2<br>A False |
|---|---|---|
| A1 Choose to believe testimony reliable (Adopt C) | Greatly extended 'true belief' and some new false beliefs | Great extension of error and some new true beliefs |
| A2 Choose not to believe testimony reliable (Reject C) | Great failure to get available 'true belief' | Great safety from error (p. 111) |
| Desirability Matrix: | 10<br>-10 | -10<br>10 |
| Probability Matrix: | .5<br>.5 | .5<br>.5 |

Expected Desirability of A1 = 5 - 5 = 0

Expected Desirability of A2 = -5 + 5 = 0 (p. 113)

Coady concludes that when we compare the risk of being in error with the possibility of gaining more true beliefs, there is no reason to choose one over the other. We rely on testimony and will continue to do so, but our reliance is unjustified by the arguments used or implied by Price.

*Chapter 6. The Analogical Approach* examines Bertrand Russell's theory of testimony. For Russell, I know that other minds exist and are communicating intentions by analogy with my own case. But can analogical argument from my own case guarantee the general sincerity and veracity of testimony? Russell does not

explicitly use analogy in this way. F. H. Bradley does. He argues that "our belief in testimony is justified by an inference to a mental state in the witness essentially one with our own" (p. 118). I can trust another's testimony only if I can view her as observing on my behalf, and I can so view her only if she has "the same mental outlook" I do (p. 118). Coady argues that since identity of outlook cannot be determined without relying on testimony, Bradley's approach is circular and will not solve Russell's problem. Thus, on Coady's analysis, the theories of testimony developed by Hume, Price, and Russell all fail. Coady finds more promising Thomas Reid's view that testimonial beliefs are not inferential, but basic.

In *Chapter 7. Scottish Fundamentalism*, Coady explores Reid's analogy between testimony and perception. Reid rejects the standard view that testimonial beliefs are inferential, maintaining that normally we accept what we are told as reliable just as we accept "the testimony of our senses" (p. 123). Both perception and testimony require the proper functioning of the relevant cognitive mechanism(s) and the satisfaction of certain conditions. Neither requires that S know what the mechanisms are or that the conditions are satisfied. Thus, for Reid, testimonial beliefs are basic, as are perceptual beliefs.

In **Section III. The Solution**, Coady argues that testimony is a basic source of knowledge. He begins by examining similarities and differences between testimony and other sources of information. Unlike perception and memory, testimony is always testimony *that*. This, he argues, entails neither that perception is more basic than testimony nor that there is no basic testimonial knowledge. Some have argued that testimony is inferential because all our testimonial beliefs are mediated by the witness's veracity, reliability, etc. Coady rejects this argument as fallacious because it does not fit our actual practices. We do not ordinarily consider, and often cannot investigate, the witness's veracity, reliability, etc. Moreover, the same reasoning applies to perception. Perceptual beliefs rest on truths about the conditions of perception, but ordinarily we need not establish these truths as part of the justification of our perceptual beliefs (pp. 141-144).

Nonetheless, perception may still seem more basic than testimony, for testimony is possible only via perception: S must *hear* the testimony or *see* it written. Coady insists that this does not make testimony inferior to perception:

> The giving and receiving of testimony is, as Reid calls it, 'a social operation of the mind', which presumes upon perception in the ways already indicated but which has its own epistemic autonomy (p. 147).

Coady prefers to think of perception, memory, testimony and inference as all on the same level, but with perception in the center. These four sources of information interpenetrate each other. Memory, testimony, and inference enter essentially into perceptual belief formation. There is no perception so pure that it is uncontaminated by memory, testimony, and inference. Consequently, the idea of making perception the basis of memory, testimony, and inference is absurd (pp. 146-147).

I see a possible confusion in Coady's reasoning here. Granting perception and testimony equal status entails that testimony is basic only on the foundationalist assumption that perception is basic. Coherentism gives perception and testimony equal justificational status: both are inferential or non-basic. In making inference an essential part of perception, Coady seems to be committed to the coherentist view that perception is inferential, not basic.

The "hankering after a primacy for perception is really a hankering after a primacy for *my* perceptions" (p. 148). This, Coady argues, assumes the egocentric starting-point of traditional epistemology: "the epistemically isolated self" (p. 149).

Coady maintains that this starting-point is "a product of cultural and philosophical predilection rather than an a priori inevitability" (p. 149). Within it he sees the seeds of another. For Descartes's view of the individual's native powers leads into "the idea of the subject as endowed with powers and capacities as a member of a species so endowed" (p. 150). This, Coady argues, should shift the focus from the individual to the community. Thus, "we see our starting point as encompassing *our* knowledge and not exclusively *my* knowledge" (p. 150). We should begin epistemology by asking, "What is the nature of *our* knowledge?" or "How do *we* come to know?" (p. 150) Unfortunately, Coady does not discuss what forms communal theories of knowledge can take. Can there be a communal foundationalism, or must communalism be either contextualist or coherentist? Is Coady's theory a communal foundationalism? If so, he fails to make explicit the nature of such a view.

Coady insists there is a "fundamental flaw" in individualist justifications, such as Mackie's, for communal epistemological trust. Such justifications covertly depend on the reliability of trusting others while overtly trying to establish that reliability (p. 152). This dependence is inevitable because such justifications must begin by assuming a public language, and to understand such a language, I must treat many of the reports expressed in it as true.

Can any argument provide a justification or philosophical rationale for our very extensive trust in testimony? In answer to this question, Coady offers an intellectual overview of our testimonial practices. He begins by exploring Donald Davidson's project of radical interpretation ["Radical Interpretation," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 125-139]. Coady believes that Davidson's fundamental insight is one shared by the later Wittgenstein: understanding another's speech requires a shared world view (Davidson, "The Method of Truth," *Inquiries*, p. 199).

Coady states Davidson's first principle of charity thus:

> (a) We must apply a principle of charity (or some similar interpretive maxim) in interpreting the speech of others, most notably an alien community, so that agreement is maximized or optimized amongst us and them. We must, that is, find their expressed beliefs mostly correct by our lights (pp. 157-158).

Coady examines Davidson's three arguments for (a) and Colin McGinn's criticisms of them ["Charity, Interpretation and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1977), 521-535]. The third argument contains the best reconstruction of what appears most promising in the first two arguments (p. 162). It may be paraphrased as follows:

1. We cannot identify beliefs at all without locating them in a wider pattern of beliefs most of which must be true.
2. The pattern determines the subject-matter of the belief.
3. If we cannot identify beliefs, we cannot identify meanings, since beliefs/desires/meanings are delivered together in the process of interpretation.

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Therefore, interpreting speech requires the general correctness of belief (p. 162).

McGinn offers the following counterexample. Some ancient peoples believed that "the stars were apertures in a vast dome through which penetrated light from a great fire beyond" (p. 162). We can identify such a belief and related beliefs without holding them true. Indeed, we recognize that such beliefs are radically false. What allows us to identify such a belief as a belief about the stars is not that it is true, but that we can use our concepts and our (true) beliefs to identify the objects it was about (pp. 162-163).

Coady concludes that McGinn's criticisms of Davidson's argument show not that we can dispense with a principle of charity, but that we can tell what some beliefs of an alien community are about, and even what many such beliefs are, without treating those beliefs as shared or true. Thus, Coady concludes, (a) is too strong, but contains a solid core of truth. We must assume that aliens inhabit the same physical universe, evolved in broadly similar ways, and need nourishment, reproduction, safety, cooperation, etc. This commonality of constitution produces some basic similarity of outlook and therefore, a considerable commonality of beliefs and interests (pp. 166-168).

Coady concludes Section III. by reiterating that we do not prove from purely individual resources that testimony is reliable. Rather, beginning with an inevitable commitment to some degree of reliability, we find this commitment strongly enforced and supported by the cohesion between our informational sources and the coherence of our beliefs (p. 173). Coady characterizes his position as fitting none of the four outlined in Chapter 1. He sees his position as most like the fundamentalist approach of Reid, but without relying merely on an appeal to intuitively evident first principles. Mistakenly assuming that foundationalism is the only plausible theory, Coady makes testimonial beliefs basic. Had he seriously considered the alternative theories of coherentism and contextualism, his conclusion might have been very different. Coherentism puts testimony and perception on the same level by making both inferential. Coady's remarks about cohesion and coherence together with his earlier remarks about perception and inference seem to point to some type of coherentist or to a mixed foundationalist/coherentist theory. Yet, he seems unaware of this implication.

In **Sections IV. and V.** Coady extends his analysis to other issues. **Section IV. The Puzzles** deals with such paradoxes as Locke's view that testimonial transmission must lead to less and less reliability of the transmitted message, and hence to the eventual disappearance of history. In **Section V. The Applications**, Coady shifts towards more applied issues and uses his new view of testimony to challenge assumptions in history, mathematics, psychology, and law. In Chapter 13, for example, Coady gives counterexamples to R. G. Collingwood's influential denial of any role for testimony in serious historical research. In Chapter 15, he criticizes claims of psychologists that testimony is unreliable. Psychological researchers often rely implicitly on the reliability of testimony to prove its unreliability. They also operate from three questionable background assumptions about the common man and the law: super-realism, passive recording, and very great accuracy.

Influenced by Austin, Ryle, Grice, Anscombe, and Kneale, Coady is steeped in the Oxford tradition, and *Testimony* demonstrates that this tradition is still very much alive. The book is not aimed exclusively at philosophers. Sections I., II., and V. can be understood by undergraduate philosophy majors and well-educated non-philosophers. Sections III. and IV. are more technical. Non-philosophers will have difficulty understanding some of the sophisticated issues discussed there. Section III. is suitable for graduate students in philosophy, but should be used with undergraduates only at the end of a course in the philosophy of language. *Testimony* could be used with other texts in several graduate courses: epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of law, and philosophy of history. The use that would do most justice to the book, however, would be as the focal text in a graduate seminar on testimony. It could, then, be supplemented by relevant passages from Plato, Hume, Reid, Russell, Price, Mackie, Davidson, McGinn, and other relevant authors.

"Testimony is a prominent and underexplored epistemological landscape" (p. i)

which deserves much more attention than it has received. Coady has given us an important look at this long neglected topic. *Testimony* makes an important theoretical contribution to the field of informal logic by advancing our understanding of judgements of the credibility of reports. For scholars interested in testimony, this book is a "must read."

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