

## LOCKE ON TESTIMONY: A REEXAMINATION

Joseph Shieber

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In analogy to the notion of political authority, the sort of legitimate power possessed by a sovereign whose commands ought rightly to be followed, one may also consider the notion of *intellectual authority*, the sort of epistemological authority possessed by a source of information whose testimony ought rightly to be believed. With this analogy in mind, it might seem unsurprising that many have characterized the Enlightenment as a period in which intellectual authority came under greater attack, particularly most strikingly so when taken in contrast with the supposed deference to intellectual authority traditionally imputed to medieval thinkers. Thus, e.g., M. J. Inwood notes as one of the central characteristics of the Enlightenment the requirement that “beliefs are to be accepted only on the basis of reason, not on the authority of priests, sacred texts, or tradition” and singles this characteristic out for particular criticism, noting that the Enlightenment “demand that an individual should subject all his beliefs to criticism, and accept nothing on authority . . . is thwarted by the gulf between any given individual’s meagre first-hand experience and the range of knowledge now available to him.”<sup>1</sup>

Given that the period from the second half of the seventeenth century onward saw an explosion in the widespread dissemination of books and the attendant rise of the book as a tool for the transmission of information, however, it is particularly ironic that the Enlightenment has traditionally been characterized by a hostility to the acceptance of intellectual authority—precisely the sort of authority that readers in England and Scotland in the mid-seventeenth century and later accorded to the authors of those treatises on astronomy, physiology, geography, travel, history, etc., that these readers began purchasing and collecting in ever-increasing numbers.

Thus, in her classic work *The English Book Trade*, Marjorie Plant writes,

In between the quarrels of James I and his Parliament Sir Francis Bacon found time to write his *Novum Organum*. William Harvey, in the meantime, was developing his theory of the circulation of the blood. From now onwards more and more of the entries in the Stationer's Register bear witness to a growing interest in astronomy, mathematics, physiology and mechanics. . . . Access to books had by now become a necessity to the man of the world. Pepys had collected so many of them by 1666 that they were piled on chairs, an inconvenience which, he confessed, prevented him from reading any but the topmost.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, H. S. Bennett records that, by the mid-seventeenth century, a wide variety of texts was available to readers, not only religious and literary texts or the scientific texts to which Plant alludes above, but also on topics including law, education, gardening, horseback riding, animal husbandry, geography, travel, history, and news.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of intellectual life in seventeenth-century England is the rise of the book as an ever-more widely available medium for the dissemination of information of all sorts.

Despite the growing body of work underscoring the increasingly central role that books and the book trade played in the lives of the middle and upper classes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, there has as yet been no work that assesses the impact of this development on the epistemological theories of the day. One way to address this deficit is to focus on John Locke as a representative figure of English Enlightenment theorizing about the legitimacy of intellectual authority and to explore the way in which a greater attention to the cultural milieu in which Locke worked can lead to a profound reexamination of his writings on intellectual authority. In particular, such an exploration would help to redress the inattention to the rise of a culture of reading and the growing availability of books in early modern England that has led historians of philosophy largely to misrepresent Locke's theory of testimonial justification. Indeed, Locke, though usually read as having attempted to denigrate testimony as a legitimate source of justification, sought to devise an epistemology that would do justice to the centrality of testimony in the intellectual lives of growing numbers of his contemporaries in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and Scotland.

## 2. The Case for Locke as an Epistemological Individualist

Famously, the *Essay* offers support for ascribing sometimes seemingly contradictory positions to Locke. In the case of Locke's theory of testimony, however, the readings of Locke have been—perhaps unusual-

ly—one-sided. This might simply be that, in the case of testimony, Locke's reasoning is uncharacteristically consistent. And indeed, the following passage would seem to offer the strongest support for taking Locke to have inadequately appreciated the role of testimony in increasing the breadth and depth of human understanding:

For, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes, as to know by other Mens Understandings. So much as we our selves consider and comprehend of Truth and Reason, so much we possess of real and true Knowledge. The floating of other mens Opinions in our brains, makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was Science, is in us but Opiniatry, whilst we give up our Assent only to reverend Names, and do not, as they did, employ our own Reason to understand those Truths, which gave them reputation. . . . In the Sciences, every one has so much as he really knows and comprehends: What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreads; which however well in the whole piece, make no considerable addition to his stock, who gathers them. Such borrowed Wealth, like Fairy-money, though it were Gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but Leaves and Dust when it comes to use.<sup>4</sup>

One of those commentators who is typical in taking this passage to be exemplary for Locke's overall theory of testimony is F. F. Schmitt. After quoting the passage above at length, Schmitt proceeds to suggest that the "potent" reading of this passage is one that would see Locke as intending "to deny the possibility of knowledge on testimony on the ground that it entails that the subject must forego the source's reason for the belief, whether that reason be understood as a set of beliefs, as in the case of experts, or an experience, as in the case of witnesses."<sup>5</sup>

Though Schmitt explicitly disavows any intention of making a serious exegetical claim with respect to Locke's theory of testimony, he continues by dubbing this position, according to which knowledge on the basis of testimony is impossible, the *Lockean view* of knowledge on testimony. Of course, given Locke's official position concerning the definition of "knowledge," according to which it is "the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas," (*Essay*, IV.i.2) it would simply be a matter of the definition of knowledge that testimony is not a source; testimony is not a form of perception, and Locke's use of the notion of perception in his definition of knowledge is a deliberate one.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Schmitt appeals to this aspect of Locke's epistemology, stating that the claim that testimony is not a source of knowledge is simply

entailed by Locke's inferential account of knowledge, on which all knowledge is ultimately based, via inference (namely, demonstration),

on intuited and sensitive knowledge: since we do not have intuited knowledge of the reliability of sources, and since, according to Locke, we have sensitive knowledge only of generalizations about nature, knowledge on testimony is ruled out.<sup>7</sup>

For Locke, however, the reason to limit knowledge to intuition, immediate perception, and deductive inference is that he took knowledge to entail certain justification or warrant. Given this fact, then, it is clear that Locke's notion of knowledge is simply not coextensive with contemporary notions. For this reason, the more interesting question is not whether Locke believed testimony to be a source of knowledge, in his more restrictive sense of "knowledge," but rather whether he recognized testimony as a source of evidence that would serve to rationalize belief.

Schmitt's argument is that Locke did not consider testimony to be a source of evidence in this sense; nor is he alone in reading Locke in this way. Thus, Alvin Plantinga, in his *Warranted Christian Belief*, saw Locke as paradigmatic of an Enlightenment culture that

looked askance at testimony and tradition; Locke saw them as a preeminent source of error. The Enlightenment idea is that perhaps we *start* by learning from others—our parents, for example. Properly mature and independent adults, however, will have passed beyond all that and believe what they do on the basis of evidence. But this is a mistake; you can't know so much as your name or what city you live in without relying on testimony.<sup>8</sup>

Other commentators who have had occasion to consider Locke's views on testimony have almost unanimously followed this interpretative line, taking Locke to have been an extreme example of—to use C. A. J. Coady's term—*epistemological individualism*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, e.g., Michael Welbourne reads Locke as suggesting that testimony that *p* can only yield justified belief that the testifier testifies that *p* and never justification for the belief in *p* itself.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is interesting to note that both Coady and Welbourne cite the same passage cited at length by Schmitt in his discussion of Locke, appealing to this passage as the primary evidence for their reading of Locke's views on the evidentiary status of testimony.

### 3. THE STATUS OF TESTIMONY AS A SOURCE OF EVIDENCE IN THE MEDIEVAL ERA

Far from the transition from the medieval era to the Enlightenment being one aptly characterizable as a transition from a period of—perhaps excessive—dependence on intellectual authority to one of—again, perhaps equally excessive—rejection of intellectual authority, in fact, it is the medieval era that was marked by a strong rejection of intellectual authority and emphasis on the role of individual rationality in

the accordance of evidential status. Thus, the noted historian of science Edward Grant, to cite one example, characterizes the Middle Ages largely in terms of an allegiance to an Aristotelian-influenced rationalism in which there was little room for empirical investigation:

[A]lthough most in the Middle Ages followed Aristotle and emphasized sensation and observation as the foundations of knowledge and science, they rarely appealed to direct observations to support an argument or a claim, perhaps, because, as Aristotle argued, our senses do not “tell us the ‘why’ of anything—for example, why fire is hot; they only say that it is hot.” To know the why of things requires theoretical explanations based on the way things had to be in order for the world to function as it did. Nor did medieval natural philosophers perform experiments in support of a theory or a claim. It was never regarded as essential to do so. These habits had to await the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup>

If rationalism dominated the intellectual spirit of the age, however, it is perhaps unsurprising that there would be little room for respect for intellectual authority within intellectual circles: if—as the rationalist requires—one is not even to credit the testimony of the senses, how much less would one credit the testimony of others.

One might immediately object that this characterization of the Middle Ages founders on the obvious and pervasive authority of the Church. However, it is crucial to recall that the authority of the Church was taken to be *underwritten* by the authority of reason. Indeed, it is this conviction that reason demands allegiance to the Church that justified the then-common practice of holding those who failed to recognize the authority of the Church to be blameworthy for their inability properly to exercise their God-given rational faculties. Such arguments as these enjoyed a pedigree as old as the history of the Christian Church itself. Thus, Paul, in Romans 1:18–20 writes that

the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those men that detain the truth of God in injustice: because that which is known of God is manifest in them. For God hath manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, His eternal power also and divinity: so that they are inexcusable.<sup>12</sup>

Far from being a period characterized by respect for intellectual authority, the Middle Ages was, in fact, a time in which the dominant educational schools fostered a radical intellectual individualism. As Grant suggests, “the challenge to authority . . . began in the early Middle Ages and gathered adherents in the course of the late Middle Ages. . . . [N]umerous passages . . . reveal the many ways in which appeals

to authority were criticized."<sup>13</sup> Even Aristotle, whose work served as a touchstone for so many of the medieval philosophers, was not immune from criticism—though, as Grant allows, this “may come as a surprise to moderns who are very likely to be influenced by Galileo’s depiction of medieval scholastics as slavish followers of Aristotle. . . . Nevertheless, disagreements with Aristotle were commonplace in the Middle Ages, and there were numerous departures from his physics and cosmology.”<sup>14</sup>

On the whole, then, Grant’s discussion would seem to suggest that the best way to characterize the underlying philosophical tenor of the Middle Ages is in terms of an adherence to what would come to be known, in the modern era, as rationalism and, thus, in terms of an attendant *antipathy* toward adherence to intellectual authority. As Grant characterizes the dominant training of the period, “We see that, in the medieval university, the training in Aristotelian natural philosophy . . . was characterized by an overall methodology that emphasized organization, analysis, and reasoned argument. The idea was to demonstrate conclusively your own ideas and to argue persuasively that the alternatives were either mistaken or inadequate.”<sup>15</sup> Nor is Grant alone in characterizing the intellectual atmosphere of the Middle Ages in this way; indeed, both Etienne Gilson and the noted German historian of medieval philosophy Kurt Flasch have characterized the thought of the Middle Ages as involving such rationalistic elements.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. THE RISE OF THE BOOK AND THE NEW ROLE OF TESTIMONY: THE EXAMPLE OF LOCKE

Thus, in the view of Grant and others, far from being an age in which respect for intellectual authority was rampant, the medieval era was, in fact, dominated by a strong skepticism toward intellectual authority. This is in stark contrast to the tenor of Enlightenment England and Scotland, where the rise of the Enlightenment brought with it an increased respect for the value of information gained from others. And though, of course, the limited amount of evidence able to be mustered here may raise some concerns with respect to the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* nature of the argument sketched, the points adduced at the very least suggest that this contrast between the medieval and the Enlightenment periods with respect to the status of intellectual authority may be traced to the rise of the book as a widespread personal possession and commodity during the Enlightenment.

In his acquisition and high regard for books, Locke was utterly characteristic of his age. As noted in Roger Woolhouse’s recent, comprehensive biography, Locke cherished his books; when Locke finally set up a house at Oates in 1691, one of the tasks that he relished was, as Woolhouse

recounts, “making use of the printed catalogue of the Bodleian Library, . . . listing and cataloguing [his books], systematically placing them on new walnut shelves.” Furthermore, Locke was a devoted bibliophile from his earliest days as a student at Westminster. Begun in 1649, Locke’s personal records of expenses for student essentials like paper, clothes, toiletries, and haircuts “are interspersed with books he bought: Lucan’s *Pharsalia* in English and Latin, George Abbot’s *A Brief Description of the Whole World* (1599), Thomas Godwin’s *Roman Antiquities* (1614).” By 1691, Woolhouse reports that Locke “had about two thousand titles, a number which would nearly double before his death.”<sup>17</sup>

Of course, as noted in the introduction to this paper, Locke’s bibliophilia was paradigmatic of the age in which he lived; Plant cites a clergyman of the late seventeenth century whose nearly two-thousand-volume library was typical for the learned classes of the day. Nor were these books merely collectibles or furnishings, however. Rather, they were tools; the sheer number of books in the burgeoning personal libraries of English gentlemen and scholars, however, made them ever more unwieldy tools. What the age required was some method for interacting with one’s books so as to bring order to the sheer mass of information with which those capacious libraries confronted their possessors.

The practice that developed in answer to this need was the keeping of “commonplace books.” Commonplace books served, in Enlightenment England, as the principal method for recording one’s interaction with books. They were notebooks for recording significant quotes, along with their locations and any commentary that the reader wished to record. As books increasingly became commodities to possess in large numbers, scholars began to encourage their peers and pupils to employ commonplace books as a method for recording and ordering the welter of information contained in that growing multitude of sources.

Even in this multitude, however, there was one source that quickly became the *locus classicus* for information on the method of commonplaceing itself: Locke’s “A New Method of a Common-Place-Book.”<sup>18</sup> The challenge facing compilers of commonplace books before the dissemination of Locke’s method was threefold: how to know in advance how many pages in one’s notebook to assign to each subject heading, where to enter those headings within the notebook, and how to locate the headings when needed. Locke’s innovation was to place the index at the *front* of the commonplace book, solely on the first two pages, after which he entered his notes under subject headings on the remaining pages.

Locke was able to do this because of his ingenious method for classifying subject headings. Locke’s index consisted of a table displaying an alphabet of twenty letters, five letters per column, with each of those

letters further subdivided into five cells, one for each vowel. Given this index, Locke describes the procedure for entering notes as follows

If I would put any thing in my Common-Place-Book, I find out a Head to which I may refer it. Each Head ought to be some important and essential Word to the matter in hand, and in that Word regard is to be had to the first Letter, and the Vowel that follows it; for upon these two Letters depend all the use of the *Index*.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, for example, page numbers for notes under the head of *Testimony* would be entered in the cell for *Te*.

This new method was such an improvement over previous strategies for commonplacing that, though Anke te Heesen grants that, “already in 1605, Francis Bacon recommends in *Advancement of Learning* the use of ‘commonplace books for entering the fruits of reading, quotations and references,’” it was *Locke’s* method for cataloguing his books and recording his reading, published posthumously in English in 1706, that became a model for young men in eighteenth-century Britain and after:

The philosopher John Locke, who influenced entire generations of English gentlemen with his instructions of how to make commonplace books, rendered the procedure methodical. . . . The “Memory is the treasury or Storehouse,” he said, but one must provide memory with an orderly basis. “It would be just for all the World as serviceable as a great deal of Household Stuff, when if we wanted any particular Thing we could not tell where to find it.”<sup>20</sup>

Writing in a similar vein, L. Dacome notes that Isaac Watts, in 1725, characterized Locke’s method as “the best” and that “as late as 1770 John Bell similarly praised Lockean commonplacing because it allowed compilers to ‘form a system of useful and agreeable knowledge.’”<sup>21</sup>

As the very practice of recording significant information from one’s reading indicates, however, and as Bacon’s suggestion “that the diligence, and pains in collecting common Places, is of great use in certainty and studying”<sup>22</sup> only further underscore, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English youth were trained to treat books as sources of evidence, evidence to be treasured and stored in memory—and, where memory failed, in one’s commonplace books. Like one’s own memory, one could, with training, structure one’s commonplace books to make them more serviceable. Thus, te Heesen indicates that “[e]ntire generations of intellectuals and young gentlemen were educated to practice [Locke’s commonplace bookkeeping] technique. The notebook was a technique in service of discipline,” and for the young men of eighteenth-century England, “notebooks were a place for collecting things, a technique for discipline, chronological recording and evidence.”<sup>23</sup>

## 5. EVIDENCE FROM A BRIEF SURVEY OF LOCKE'S CONTEMPORARIES

Indeed, this use of the commonplace book as a way of recording evidence from one's reading is precisely one of the primary uses to which Locke put his own commonplaces. Thus, in his early "Essays on the Law of Nature," written in the early 1660s, Locke based his rejection of the notion that the "law of nature is inborn in us and . . . implanted by nature" on his awareness of the fact of moral disagreement, as adduced in large measure from his extensive reading of the travel accounts so popular in his day. As Woolhouse notes, "Locke's keen awareness of moral differences was derived . . . also from his fascinated reading of the accounts of travellers and merchants in the Americas and the East, an interest which would remain with him all his life."<sup>24</sup> Locke treats such evidence without further comment, noting that no one "who consults the histories both of the old and the new world, or the itineraries of travellers," will accept the idea that natural law is innately inscribed within us.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, as Steven Shapin notes, Locke was hardly alone in his untroubled use of testimony as a source of evidence in argument. Shapin recalls that "Boyle was one among many commentators who noted that it was through testimony that we come securely and warrantably to have such factual historical knowledge as that Caesar existed and that a new star appeared in the heavens in 1572."<sup>26</sup> Even more forcefully, John Wilkins argued that there are "several things which we cannot otherwise know, but as others do inform us of them. As namely *matters of fact*, together with the account of *persons* and *places* at a distance."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the former member of Cromwell's court Sir Charles Wolseley suggested that to refuse to accept the evidence of testimony is

to deny our selves the benefit of any part of the World, or of any thing done in any part of the World, at any time in the World; but just what we our *selves* saw in the times and places wherein we lived. No one Age can be of any use to another, in any Record of it; nor any one Man of use to another, by his Credit.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, as the experimentalists allied with Boyle and the Royal Society were well aware, the advancement of science would scarcely be possible if one were required to reconstruct and witness personally every experiment before one could accept its outcome as data. Not only were individual scientists subject to practical limitations, such as limited access to scientific equipment such as telescopes, but as experiments became more complex and relied for their success on more complicated equipment, there was the very real possibility that experiments would be difficult to reproduce. Thus, in his "History of Fluidity and Firmness," Boyle cautions those seeking to replicate his results that

we have never yet found any sort of experiments, wherein such slight variations of circumstances could so much defeat our endeavor; which we therefore mention, that in case such experiments be tried again, it may be thought the less strange, if others be not able to do as much at the first or second, or perhaps the tenth or twentieth trial, as we did after much practice had made us expert in this nice experiment.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, there are singularities in nature—such as, e.g., the first appearance of a new star in the sky on a certain date—that are, by their very nature, not subject to the possibility of reproduction. In all such cases, then, as Boyle noted, others “must take these phaenomena upon the credit of those that have observed them.”<sup>30</sup>

Of course, all these pragmatic justifications *presuppose* the—at least potential—value of testimonial evidence, rather than defending one’s license to defer to testimony against a radical skeptic. Such a stance, however, is in keeping with the tenor of the age. Thus, Shapin notes that “Boyle argued . . . [that] everyday action had to rest upon a quality of knowledge that was in principle insecure but in practice fully answerable to the demands placed upon it.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Locke himself—in a passage that anticipates pragmatic rejoinders to Hume’s causal skepticism—noted that

[h]e that, in the ordinary affairs of life, would admit of nothing but direct plain demonstration, would be sure of nothing in this world, but of perishing quickly. The wholesomeness of his meat or drink would not give him reason to venture on it: and I would fain know what it is he could do upon such grounds as are capable of no doubt, no objection. (*Essay*, IV.xi.10)

Such a position, of course, would be unthinkable without the underlying conviction that the methods used “in the ordinary affairs of life” are, in fact, appropriate and valuable. This, however, was precisely the position of early modern English thought.

Ironically, these early modern thinkers rehearse many of the arguments *in favor* of testimony that contemporary philosophers use in calling them to task for *maligning* testimony. Thus, recall Plantinga’s rebuke of Locke, quoted in section 2 above, in which Plantinga claimed that Locke’s disregard for testimonial evidence “is a mistake; you can’t know so much as your name . . . without relying on testimony.” As Shapin notes, such arguments were, in fact, a common trope among the early moderns in England. For example, Shapin quotes Stillingfleet as arguing that “most *concerning* and *weighty actions* of mens *lives*, are built on no other *foundation*” than testimony, and he continues, paraphrasing that “a gentleman’s title to his land derives from testimony. So does a trader’s knowledge of the existence of such a place as the Indies, and, indeed, all persons’ knowledge of their own natural parents.”<sup>32</sup>

One pragmatic reason for accepting testimonial evidence, then, rests on the realization that certain facts—those concerning far-removed places or times—are closed to our own direct experience. A further reason—already implied in Boyle’s suggestion that certain expertise, expertise not available to all, might be required to perform certain experiments—is that our own abilities or direct experience might not be as far-reaching as those of others. It would be mere vanity to suppose that we exceed all of our peers with respect to the various potential forms of experience or intellectual excellence. As this is the case, prudence would seem to recommend intellectual deference.

## 6. THE EVIDENCE OF THE *ESSAY*

Of course, all such evidence would be irrelevant if Locke’s considered judgment, as expressed in the *Essay*, were as univocal as his commentators have made it seem. Though Locke is, in fact, univocal on the question of whether testimony is a legitimate source of evidence, it is not as his commentators have suggested; rather, Locke is univocal in his emphasis on the *centrality* of testimony as a source of evidence.

Indeed, even the notorious passage to which Schmitt, et al., advert admits of a more subtle reading than the one that Schmitt himself advances. The context of Locke’s rejection of testimony as a source of information is Locke’s discussion of innate ideas. And though the inflammatory language with which Locke indicts testimony is often quoted, the first sentences of the passage are generally passed over:

Not that I want a due respect to other Mens Opinions; but after all, the greatest reverence is due to Truth; and, I hope, it will not be thought arrogance, to say, That, perhaps, we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative Knowledge, if we sought it in the Fountain, in the consideration of Things themselves; and made use rather of our own Thoughts, than other Mens to find it: For, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes. (*Essay*, I.iv.23)

As these first clauses would indicate, the context of Locke’s discussion is the pursuit of “rational and contemplative *knowledge*” and philosophical inquiry in particular; when Locke here rejects testimony as a source of evidence, he is rejecting it in the strongest terms as a source of evidence for philosophical theses.

This point is underscored when one considers another few lines, usually excised from the middle of the above passage:

*Aristotle* was certainly a knowing Man, but no body ever thought him so, because he blindly embraced, and confidently vented the Opinions of another. And if the taking up of another’s Principles, without

examining them, made not him a Philosopher, I suppose it can make no body else so. In the Sciences, every one has so much as he really knows and comprehends . . . (*Essay*, I.iv.23)

Certainly, however, the claim that philosophers should not appeal to authority, but rather should rely on the strength of their arguments in supporting their positions, is not one that would mark Locke as unusual for contemporary understandings of philosophical argumentation. Indeed, this should serve to underscore Locke's position as the harbinger of the intellectual tradition in post-Enlightenment philosophy.

This last passage also serves to emphasize that the context of Locke's stark repudiation of testimony as a source of evidence is that of a discussion of arguments in philosophy. Nor should Locke's invocation of "the Sciences" fool the contemporary reader. For Locke, the sciences were limited to the study of subjects capable of certainty—and, therefore, e.g., did not include what have come to be known as the "natural sciences." Thus, Locke grants that

I deny not, but a Man accustomed to rational and regular Experiments shall be able to see farther into the Nature of Bodies, and guess righter at their yet unknown Properties, than one, that is a Stranger to them: But yet, as I have said, this is but Judgment and Opinion, not Knowledge and Certainty. This *way* of getting, and *improving our Knowledge in Substances only by Experience* and History, which is all that the weakness of our Faculties in this State of *Mediocrity*, which we are in this World, can attain to, makes me suspect, that natural Philosophy is not capable of being made a Science. (*Essay*, IV.xii.10)

That is, the experimental sciences themselves yield a level of justification sufficient only to underwrite *opinion*, not knowledge, and are thus, in fact, *on a par* with the justification provided by appropriate instances of testimony. Indeed, as demonstrated in the previous section and as noted by no less a witness than Boyle himself, researchers in the experimental sciences must often employ testimonial evidence as a source of justification.

In fact, Locke was no less aware of the centrality of testimony than was his compatriot Boyle. Locke considered any level of justification less than knowledge under the heading of *probability*:

*Probability* is likeliness to be true, the very notation of the Word signifying such a Proposition, for which there be Arguments or Proofs, to make it pass or be received for true. . . . *Belief, Assent, or Opinion* . . . is the admitting or receiving any Proposition for true, upon Arguments or Proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain Knowledge that it is so." (*Essay*, IV.xv.3)

Locke recognized only two grounds of probability: (1) “[t]he conformity of any thing with our own Knowledge, Observation, and Experience” and (2) “[t]he Testimony of others, vouching their Observation and Experience” (*Essay*, IV.xv.4).

Thus, not only did Locke not impugn testimony as a source of evidence, but he considered it rather to be one of the central sources of justification for belief. There are two points to note here immediately regarding Locke’s recognition of “the Testimony of others, vouching their Observation and Experience” as a source of evidence. The first is that, though Locke there speaks of “Observation and Experience,” we may substitute for these the shorthand *knowledge*. The second is that a more subtle reading of the distinction between *knowledge* and *mere opinion*, in Lockean parlance, will allow one better to appreciate Locke’s evaluation of testimonial justification.

To appreciate the first of these points, recall that, in Locke’s idiosyncratic usage, knowledge is of three types: intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive. Observation and experience, of course, both belong only to the third type—viz., sensitive knowledge. So one might suppose that Locke is here suggesting that testimony is only a source of evidence in those cases in which the testifier is conveying information concerning propositions that he or she knows via sensitive knowledge.

This, however, would be too quick. For, in the same chapter in which he introduces testimony as one of the two right grounds of probability, Locke grants that someone could rightly come to believe a mathematical theorem solely on the basis of accepting the testimony of a reputable mathematician:

[A man], hearing a Mathematician, a Man of credit, affirm the three Angles of a Triangle, to be equal to two right ones, *assents* to it; *i.e.*, receives it for true. In which case, the foundation of his Assent is the Probability of the thing, the Proof being such, as for the most part carries Truth with it: The Man, on whose Testimony he receives it, not being wont to affirm any thing contrary to, or besides his Knowledge, especially in matters of this kind. So that which causes his Assent to this Proposition . . . is the wonted Veracity of the Speaker in other cases, or his supposed Veracity in this. (*Essay*, IV.xv.1)

Therefore, it would seem that Locke would allow that a testifier who testifies on the basis of his own demonstrative knowledge can thereby rightly induce assent in a trusting recipient of that testimony. Nor is there any reason to suppose that we could not provide an appropriate example of a similar case regarding testimony concerning a testifier’s intuitive knowledge. Given this, then, there seems every reason for reformulating Locke’s principle concerning the testimonial ground of probability

thus: (2') The testimony of others, vouching their knowledge. We will subsequently refer to this principle as the *testimonial principle*.

The second point with respect to the testimonial principle is that an adequate appreciation of the role of the requirement of *knowledge* on the part of the testifier will help us better to recognize the coherence of many of Locke's pronouncements regarding the evidence of testimony in the *Essay*.<sup>33</sup> Thus, consider Locke's discussion of another potential ground of probability,

which though by it self it be no true ground . . . , yet is often made use of for one, by which Men most commonly regulate their Assent, and upon which they pin their Faith more than any thing else, and, that is, *the Opinion of others*; though there cannot be a more dangerous thing to rely on, nor more likely to mislead one; since there is much more Falshood and Errour amongst Men, than Truth and Knowledge. And if the Opinions and Perswasions of others, whom we know and think well of, be a ground of Assent, Men have Reason to be Heathens in *Japan*, Mahumetans in *Turkey*, Papists in *Spain*, Protestants in *England*, and Lutherans in *Sueden*. (*Essay*, IV.xv.6)

Were we not already mindful of the requirement, in Locke's formulation of the testimonial principle, that testifiers testify on the basis of *knowledge*, we would likely be confused by Locke's repudiation of the "Opinion of others" as a source of evidence. However, since we have, by now, become suitably sensitive to the distinction between knowledge and opinion, this passage ought no longer to be a source of confusion: the *knowledge* of others is a proper ground for assent, whereas the mere opinion of others is not.

Indeed, if we now return to the passage from book I of the *Essay* cited by Schmitt, et al., in support of the reading of Locke as a radical epistemological individualist, we are now in a position to note that the language there uniformly deals not with the communicated *knowledge* of others, as would be required by the testimonial principle, but with "the floating of other mens *Opinions*" or the "confidently vented . . . *Opinions* of another" (my italics). This, then, is further evidence that the passage so often cited as support of Locke's flat rejection of testimony as a source of evidence is, in fact, nothing of the sort; rather, the tenor of that passage is perfectly in line with the testimonial principle.

In fact, Locke's recognition of the importance of testimony is an abiding one, dating at least from his first writing of "What I think about the human understanding" from 1671. There, Locke already embraces the distinction between knowledge and probability or opinion, citing as an example to illustrate the distinction the contrast between the knowledge that Caesar made a speech at the battle of Munda acquired

by those who heard and saw Caesar speak and Locke's own belief that Caesar made such a speech. Since Locke did not see or hear the speech "that which makes [him] believe is some thing extraneous to the thing [he believes]," viz., as we saw in our reading of book IV, chapter xv, of the *Essay* above, (1) "agreeableness to our own experience" and (2) "testimony of witnesses vouching their experience."<sup>34</sup> That is, not only is Locke's position on the role of testimony in the *Essay* univocal, but it is also a position that remained remarkably consistent since his earliest theorizing on the topics of knowledge, belief, and evidence.

Locke's endorsement of the testimonial principle, according to which the testimony of others, vouching their knowledge, is a source of evidence—indeed, one of the primary sources of evidence—ought to make clear that Locke was far from the radical epistemological individualist depicted by most of his commentators.<sup>35</sup> The debate regarding the role of testimony as a source of evidence in contemporary epistemology, however, begins from a rejection of radical epistemological individualism. What is at issue in the contemporary debate is whether there exists a default license to trust individual instances of testimony, the *anti-reductionist* position, or whether no such default license exists, the *reductionist* position. It will be worthwhile, at least briefly, to consider Locke's theory of testimony in light of the contemporary debate, both to achieve a better understanding of Locke and potentially to illuminate the current discussion.

Following E. Fricker, we may characterize anti-reductionism as the acceptance of the following thesis: "An arbitrary hearer H has the epistemic right, on any occasion of testimony O, to assume, without investigation or assessment, of the speaker S who on O asserts that P by making an utterance U, that S is trustworthy with respect to U, unless H is aware of a condition C which defeats this assumption of trustworthiness."<sup>36</sup> Recall that for Locke testimonial evidence serves as grounds for probability. Here is Locke on how one should, in general, treat such grounds:

*[T]he Mind if it will proceed rationally, ought to examine all the grounds of Probability, and see how they make more or less, for or against any probable Proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it, and upon a due ballancing the whole, reject, or receive it, with a more or less firm assent, proportionably to the preponderancy of the greater grounds of Probability on one side or the other. (Essay, IV.xv.5)*

Given this, it seems clear that Locke would recognize no presumption of trustworthiness with respect to *any* piece of evidence—testimonial or otherwise—that was not itself an instance of knowledge. In this context, it is worth recalling the passage from the *Essay*, IV.xii.10, cited above,

demonstrating that Locke took the inductive evidence on which the natural sciences is based to be no more solid a foundation for belief than that of testimony. In light of this general commitment, then, it seems that Locke cannot be counted as an anti-reductionist.

Indeed, Locke is very explicit concerning the criteria one ought to consider in investigating and assessing the strength of testimony, noting that, “in the Testimony of others, is to be considered, 1. The Number. 2. The Integrity. 3. The Skill of the Witnesses. 4. The Design of the Author, where it is a Testimony out of a Book cited. 5. The Consistency of the Parts, and Circumstances of the Relation. 6. Contrary Testimonies” (*Essay*, IV.xv.4). Thus, it seems obvious that Locke cannot be counted as an anti-reductionist, in Fricker’s sense adduced above.

Recall, however, Locke’s requirement, in the testimonial principle, that, in order for testimony to serve as a proper ground for assent, the testifier vouch for his *knowledge*, as opposed to his mere opinion. Note further that whether a recipient of testimony finds him- or herself currently in a situation in which a testifier is conveying knowledge—as opposed to conveying mere opinions—is not something that is knowable by the recipient of that testimony. Thus, though Locke seems to place some burden on the recipient of testimony to assess the credibility of testifiers, he does not place all the burden on them; some criteria for the adequacy of testimonial evidence will—to employ contemporary parlance—involve speaker-conditions and not merely recipient-conditions. The requirement that testifiers assert what they know is, e.g., one such condition.<sup>37</sup>

Given this, it might well be too crude to think of Locke as advancing a simple reductionist position with respect to the epistemology of testimony. Indeed, crucially, many theories that subscribe to reductionist conditions on testimonial justification—even if those theories are not themselves reductionist—include necessary conditions involving judgments of credibility. Thus, it might well be more fitting to read Locke as a forerunner of what Paul Faulkner has recently advanced as a “hybrid theory” of testimonial justification, according to which “a judgment of credibility . . . is not irrelevant to the warrant of the associated testimonial belief.” Faulkner’s discussion is a subtle one, but he seems to be suggesting that some minimal judgment of the credibility of the testifier is required in order for the recipient of the testimony to be warranted in believing on the basis of that testimony—this, presumably, is precisely the point in Faulkner’s dubbing his view to be a hybrid between reductionism and nonreductionism.<sup>38</sup>

Locke’s epistemology is indeed no less subtle than that of Faulkner, incorporating as it does elements of epistemological internalism and

externalism, requiring no less of recipients of testimony than it does of testifiers themselves. Nor should this be any wonder to a reader sensitive to the historical context within which Locke was writing. Coming of age at a time in which a new technology for the dissemination of information, the book, had only recently become an object suitable for mass-market consumption, Locke's epistemology of testimony represents a serious attempt both to appreciate the new horizons of information that books made available to new audiences and to codify the responsibilities that consumers of those books would have in verifying their pedigrees as sources of information.

*Lafayette College*

## NOTES

1. M. J. Inwood, "Enlightenment," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), [http://www.oxfordreference.com/pages/Subjects\\_and\\_titles\\_t134.html](http://www.oxfordreference.com/pages/Subjects_and_titles_t134.html). Cf. Simon Blackburn's claim that, according to the standard view, the Enlightenment ought to be "characterized by the emphasis on experience and reason [and a] mistrust of religion and traditional authority," in S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 120. Further evidence may be found in Wokler's description of the Enlightenment's "leading thinkers, comprising Europe's first intelligentsia, [as being] perceived as jointly committed to liberating mankind from the tyrannies of dead dogma and blind faith," in R. Wokler, "Enlightenment, Continental," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), [www.rep.routledge.com](http://www.rep.routledge.com).

2. M. Plant, *The English Book Trade: An Economic History of the Making and Sale of Books*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1965), 51–52.

3. H. S. Bennett, *English Books & Readers 1603 to 1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), chap. 7.

4. J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I.iv.23. Further references to this work will be cited in the text.

5. F. F. Schmitt, "Justification, Sociality, and Autonomy," *Synthese* 73 (1987): 44.

6. Indeed, it would seem that Locke's understanding of knowledge was consistent from his earliest writings on the subject. Thus, in his notes for "What I Think about the Human Understanding" from 1671, Locke suggests that "in knowledge we first receive the impressions or sensations of the thing, and the alteration in our understanding is made by the reality of what we know," whereas, in the case of mere opinion, "that which makes me believe is extraneous to the thing I believe" (Quoted in R. Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography*

[Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 104). Cf. Michael Ayers: “[T]he basic thought is that we have knowledge when and only when it is appropriate to speak of ‘perceiving’ the truth; whether when we literally see (feel, smell, etc.) that something is in fact so, or when we metaphorically ‘see’ that something is necessarily so, as in mathematics or logical reasoning” (M. Ayers, *Locke*, vol. 1, *Epistemology* [London: Routledge, 1991], 126). For perhaps the closest contemporary approximation of Locke’s foundationalism, see Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977). Two of the central divergences between Chisholm and Locke include Locke’s seeming inclusion of the immediate perception of states of affairs in the world under the heading that Chisholm terms the *directly evident* and Locke’s requirement that knowledge include only the directly evident and the truths of reason. For Chisholm’s discussion of terms of epistemic appraisal, cf. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 5–15; for a discussion of the directly evident, cf. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 16–33.

7. Schmitt, “Justification, Sociality, and Autonomy,” 44.

8. A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 147.

9. Cf. C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13–14; and N. Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), whose attribution to Locke of the *Principle of Evidence*, according to which “each item of evidence is something that one knows” (67), would immediately rule out testimony as a source of evidence for Locke. See also S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17, for a similar reading of Locke—and contrast this with Shapin’s more subtle, and dissenting, interpretation in the later chapter five of that work. Other dissenting voices to the standard interpretation of Locke on testimony include W. R. De Jong and R. Van Woudenberg, “Testimony and John Locke’s *Principle of Evidence*,” *The Locke Newsletter* 28 (1997): 87–103; and J. J. Macintosh, “Boyle and Locke on Observation, Testimony, Demonstration and Experience,” *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2005): 275–88.

10. M. Welbourne, *The Community of Knowledge* (Aberdeen, Scotland: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), 51.

11. E. Grant, “Reason and Authority in the Middle Ages,” in *Scientific Values and Civic Virtues*, ed. Noretta Koertge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47–48.

12. Cf., e.g., Berengar of Tours (ca. 1000–88), who writes that “he who refuses this recourse [to reason], since it is in reason that he is made in the image of God, abandons his Glory, and cannot be renewed from day to day in the image of God” (translated in Toivo Holopainen, *Dialectic and Theology in the Eleventh Century* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996], 116). Compare Abelard:

He who is the Light itself, the full and perfect wisdom of God, desired by His questioning to give His disciples an example before He became a model for teachers in His preaching. When, therefore, I adduce passages from the

scriptures it should spur and incite my readers to enquire into the truth and the greater the authority of these passages, the more earnest this enquiry should be. (Excerpted in Anders Piltz, *The World of Medieval Learning*, trans. David Jones [Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981], 82.)

13. Grant, "Reason and Authority," 48.

14. Ibid, 48–49. This is a point Grant underscores in his *God and Reason in the Middle Ages*: "It is well attested that medieval natural philosophers diverged from Aristotle on many points of natural philosophy. Moreover, they frequently criticized his conclusions, basing their arguments on reason and the testimony of the senses" (Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 311). For a discussion of the role of reason in a broader social context in the late Middle Ages, see also Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

15. Grant, "Reason and Authority," 52.

16. For example, see Flasch's Introduction to *Geschichte der Philosophie in Text und Darstellung: Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982), particularly 20–21, and Gilson's *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner's, 1938).

17. R. Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 302; 11; 302.

18. Cf. A. Blair, "Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload ca. 1550–1700," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 11–28; and G. G. Meynell, "John Locke's Method of Common-Placing, as seen in his Drafts and his Medical Notebooks, Bodleian MSS Locke d.9, f.21, and f.23," *The Seventeenth Century* 8 (1993): 245–67.

19. J. Locke, "A New Method of a Common-Place-Book. Translated out of French from the Second Volume of the *Bibliothèque universelle*," in *Posthumous Works of Mr. John Locke* (London: printed by W. B. for A. and J. Churchill, 1706), 316. For more on Locke's method, see J. Yeo, "Locke's 'New Method' of Common-placing," *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 2 (2004), 1–38, particularly section 3.

20. A. te Heesen, "The Notebook, A Paper Technology," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. B. Latour and P. Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 586.

21. L. Dacome, "Noting the Mind: Commonplace Books and the Pursuit of the Self in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 614.

22. te Heesen, "The Notebook," 586.

23. Ibid., 587, 588.

24. Woolhouse, *Locke*, 55

25. Quoted in *ibid.*

26. Shapin, *Social History*, 203.

27. Quoted in *ibid.*

28. Quoted in *ibid.* For a strikingly similar contemporary defense of testimonial justification, cf. E. Sosa, "Testimony and Coherence," in E. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 215–22, particularly 221–22.

29. Quoted in S. Shapin and S. Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 188.

30. Quoted in Shapin, *Social History*, 205.

31. *Ibid.*, 208.

32. *Ibid.*, 204

33. For a recent article questioning the requirement that testifiers know that which they testify, cf. J. Lackey, "Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999): 471–90.

34. Quoted in Woolhouse, *Locke*, 104.

35. Though they ultimately contend that Locke did, in fact, count testimony as a source of evidence, De Jong and Van Woudenberg first suggest that, in order to defend Locke against the charge that he held that only known propositions—and thus not deliverances of testimony—could be sources of evidence, one must first show that this charge is not substantiated by an "alternative construal," according to which one *needs evidence* in order to believe the testimony of another, and only if there is such evidence can the testimony itself be evidence for other propositions (cf. De Jong and Van Woudenberg, "Testimony and John Locke's Principle of Evidence," 96). Even on its face, however, this alternate construal still will not support the claim that Locke held that only known propositions could serve as evidence. For even if it were possible to support one's belief in an instance of testimony on the basis of propositions that one knows, Locke could not have thought that that support would be demonstrative. Given that, the belief in the testimony—not intuitive, certainly, nor sensitive, nor demonstrative—could not count as an instance of knowledge. So it would still be a case in which the testimony would function as evidence for other propositions without itself being an instance of knowledge on the part of the recipient of the testimony.

36. E. Fricker, "Against Gullibility," in *Knowing from Words*, ed. B. K. Matilal and A. Chakrabarti (Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 144.

37. That is, Locke's view on the evidentiary status of testimony is a hybrid between internalist and externalist components. In fact, this is in keeping with the more general characteristics of Locke's epistemology. Thus, Ayers reminds us that

there is plenty of space between internalism and externalism. The extremes can be illustrated by, on the one hand, the attempt to define knowledge as justified true belief and, on the other, the simple causal theory. The position adopted in the present argument is that the truth does in fact lie between these extremes; and that, whatever their faults, the classic theories of knowl-

edge constructed before the excesses of the twentieth century lie there too. Certainly that is where Locke's theory lies. (Ayers, *Epistemology*, 133)

38. P. Faulkner, "The Social Character of Testimonial Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 594. Note also 599–600, where Faulkner writes that, "according to the hybrid theory, the acquisition of knowledge requires the audience possess some justification for acceptance." Later in the same paragraph, Faulkner suggests that "if the audience's justification for acceptance is no more than a judgment of credibility, then, ordinarily, it should provide no supplementary reason for the truth of the proposition accepted," implying that a judgment of credibility is the bare minimum that the hybrid view requires. Note also that all Locke's criteria—the number of corroborating witnesses; the integrity, skill, design, consistency, and circumstances of the testifier; and the presence of contravening testimonial evidence—may all be read as speaking to the credibility of the testifier.