

Testimony Without Belief

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ABSTRACT:

In my thesis I ask the epistemological question: If a speaker testifies to some proposition p to some hearer, and the hearer learns that p , must that speaker believe that p ? Those who maintain the traditional view in the epistemology of testimony claim that testimony is primarily a way in which speakers transmit beliefs to hearers. If this is the case, then in order to transmit the belief that p , the speaker must be in possession of a belief that p . Other epistemologists reject this view altogether and argue that when speakers stand in the right sort of epistemic relation to the *statements* they issue they properly testify. My project carves out a position between these two views. I argue that speakers need not believe p , but speakers must be in some appropriate epistemic state with respect to p in order to properly testify to p . On my view, *understanding* is among the epistemic states that can place a speaker in the right sort of epistemic relation to p . Thus, if p is a consequence of a speaker's understanding of a subject, the speaker is *licensed* to testify that p .

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Introduction

Consider the following case:

Stella is a devoutly Christian fourth-grade teacher, and her religious beliefs are grounded in a deep faith that she has had since she was a very young child. Part of this faith includes a belief in the truth of creationism and, accordingly, a belief in the falsity of evolutionary theory. Despite this, she fully recognizes that there is an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence against both of these beliefs. Indeed, she readily admits that she is not basing her own commitment to creationism on evidence at all but, rather, on the personal faith that she has in an all-powerful Creator. Because of this, Stella does not think that religion is something that she should impose on those around her, and this is especially true with respect to her fourth-grade students. Instead, she regards her duty as a teacher to involve presenting material that is best supported by the available evidence, which clearly includes the truth of evolutionary theory. As a result, after consulting reliable sources in the library and developing reliable lecture notes, Stella asserts to her students, “Modern-day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,” while presenting her biology lesson today. Though Stella herself neither believes nor knows this proposition, she never shares her own personal faith-based views with her students, and so they form the corresponding true belief solely on the basis of her reliable testimony.¹

The traditional view in the epistemology of testimony maintains that a speaker must at least believe that p in order to be licensed in testifying that p . The above case is designed to show that belief (and knowledge) cannot be a necessary condition for a speaker to be licensed to testify that p . Stella’s students gain true beliefs from Stella, who, despite her not believing that p , appears to be a credible and reliable source of information. But why think that Stella is a reliable source of information? It is my view that what makes Stella a reliable testifier is that she *understands*, in a sense I will specify, evolutionary theory and it is in virtue of her understanding that she is licensed to testify that p . Further, when Stella testifies that p , based on her understanding, this enables hearers to form justified beliefs about p . What I aim to show in this paper is that the range of epistemic states that

¹ Jennifer Lackey 2008, 48. For an earlier version of this case see Lackey 1999, 477.

can license a speaker's testimony is not limited to belief and knowledge, but also includes (at least) understanding.²

Here I want to detail what I mean by the term "licensed" as many of my claims will hinge on the employment of this term. Licensing refers to whatever a speaker must do to ensure that what she says can reasonably provide a justified belief for a hearer. A more refined way of expressing the idea here is to say that licensing is whatever the speaker has to do, before she asserts "that p ", to ground the possibility of a hearer's coming to have a warranted belief that p . The use of "warrant" here is to narrow down the range of cases that we will be concerned with, namely those where a speaker genuinely intends to convey correct information to a hearer rather than, say, a speaker looking to engage in deception or distortion of information. Briefly, let's consider how licensing looks on the traditional view. Here a speaker, S , is licensed to testify to p when S justifiably believes that p . Thus, for example, when I assert to a friend that I saw Jane in the park this afternoon, I must justifiably believe (or know) this to be the case when I make this assertion about Jane's whereabouts. The view that I aim to develop in this paper, what I call the *understanding view*, aims to reject that it is necessary that speakers must justifiably believe that p to testify to p . Having a belief is only a sufficient condition to satisfy the licensing relation. I argue that in order for an agent to be licensed to testify to p that agent must believe p , know p , or understand a target phenomenon that implies p .³

² In this paper my focus is on showing how understanding can license testimony, but I do not think that the range of epistemic states that can license testimony will then be limited to only belief, knowledge, and understanding. It may be the case that other epistemic states could license testimony as well.

³ For present purposes, knowledge can be thought of on the traditional model of justified true belief with some Gettier defeater.

The paper consists of three sections. In section one, I will briefly examine two opposing views, the *traditional* and the *statement views* and show how the *understanding view* carves out a middle way between these views. In sections two and three I will show how understanding can license a speaker's testimony in the face of two serious objections. In section two, I will argue that speakers who do not believe that *p* but understand some subject, which includes that *p*, are not guilty of deception or cognitive malfunction. In section three I will argue that when speakers possess an understanding of some subject, the speaker's understanding licenses her assertion in *functionally* the same way that knowledge licenses assertion. The main line of argument in that section aims to show that the Knowledge Norm of Assertion, the view that in order for to S assert *p*, S must know *p*, is false since it cannot account for understanding cases.

Section 1: The Traditional and Statement Views

In her recent work, Jennifer Lackey has used the Stella case to undermine the traditional view of testimony and to support an alternative view which focuses on the relationship a speaker's statements have to the truth, called the *statement view*. Here I want to briefly discuss both the statement view and the traditional view, along with some problems that each view faces. I will then motivate my view, the *understanding view*, as an alternative.

I take it as uncontroversial that the components of a testimonial exchange are as follows: there is some speaker who offers, in some communicable medium (speech standardly), an assertion that testifies to some proposition p to a hearer; the hearer, who comes into contact (by hearing, reading, etc.) with the testimony that p and forms the belief, from the testimony, that p .

In addition to this, proponents of the traditional view maintain that in order for a speaker to be licensed to testify to p , the speaker must possess, at minimum, the warranted belief that p (of course, the speaker's testimony will be enhanced if the speaker *knows* that p). That is, a speaker's warranted belief that p licenses a speaker's telling a hearer that p . On this view, beliefs are transmitted from speakers to hearers via the speaker's statements. On this view a standard case might work as follows: a speaker, S, with the proper warrant for p , says " p " to some hearer, H, and H comes to believe that p on the basis of S's believing that p . H comes to have the belief that p *because* S has that warranted belief and testified to it.⁴ When S lacks warrant for p , but asserts p there is

⁴ Examples of philosophers who express this claim are Duncan Pritchard and Elizabeth Fricker. Pritchard suggests that a paradigm case of testimony is "the intentional transfer of a belief from one agent to another, whether in the usual way via verbal assertion made by the one agent to the other, or by some other means such as through a note" (Pritchard 2004, 326). Fricker makes a stronger, but similar, claim arguing that the speech act of telling is a speech act wherein

nothing that secures the truth of p . This leaves the hearer lacking warrant for her belief that p . Let's now see how this view can interpret the Stella case.

The upshot of Stella's case is that she does not believe that p , yet she seems to be a reliable testifier with respect to propositions regarding evolution. After all, she spent a good deal of time reading up on the subject and carefully preparing lecture notes. But since she does not believe that evolution is true, the traditional view has to deny that she can genuinely testify to statements like "*homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*." The traditional view can analyze the Stella case in either of the following two ways.⁵ First, if Stella did not believe propositions about evolution she would not be a proper source of information. A proper source of information, with respect to testimony, is a speaker who states p with the right sort of warrant for p . So, the first way an adherent of the traditional view might characterize the Stella case is to claim that Stella is a derivative, rather than a proper, source of information. This is to say that someone in the testimonial chain had a warranted belief that p , which Stella, in front of the class, relays to her students. On this analysis, Stella lacks warrant for p , and is simply parroting reliable information from a proper source (e.g. the books she consults). A second way to characterize Stella on this view is to deny that Stella is a genuine testifier in any sense. An additional consequence of this characterization is that the students are not entitled to any beliefs they form on the basis of Stella's illegitimate testimony.

Neither option appears to describe Stella's case. Stella actively engages with the theory of evolution and when she testifies to propositions about evolution, does

speakers relay what they know to others. Telling is taken to be what testifying is, thus when one testifies or tells a hearer that p , the hearer takes it that the speaker knows (and thus believes) that p . (see Fricker 2006, 593-603).

⁵ For more on the sorts of strategies one might make use of to counter the Stella case, see Lackey's discussion in Lackey 2008 (48-53).

something more than simply parrot information to her students. It is conceivable that she could answer questions about the material in novel ways or amend her views in light of new information. If she were just parroting the material such results would not be expected. Stella, by virtue of her learning, seems to be a reliable source of information in her own right. That she lacks belief in the target propositions she testifies to does not seem to be adequate grounds for either denying that she *really* testifies or denying that she is a proper or non-derivative source. Thus, if the Stella case is a genuine instance of testimony, the traditional view fails to adequately characterize it. This gives us reason to suspect that belief is not necessary for licensing a speaker's testimony and that the traditional view is false.

The statement view shifts the focus from a speaker's beliefs to her statements. The statement view, per Lackey, is a reliabilist view. On this view, for S to be licensed to testify to *p*, S's *statement* that *p* must have a reliable or truth-conducive connection to the truth of *p*.⁶ Hearers, then, may gain true beliefs (and/or knowledge) from a speaker's statement when the statement stands in the right sort of relationship to the truth.⁷ Much of the focus of this view is on whether or not a hearer possesses defeaters with respect to the speaker's testimony. For example, if an agent is a serial liar and a hearer knows this, that agent's testimony can be defeated. The speaker's statement, even when she speaks from the truth, will be unreliably formed (due to facts about the agent). But not all cases of

⁶ Lackey (2008, 74) is neutral on how the reliability condition might be cashed out when specifying what I have been calling a speaker's license for testifying that *p*. She states, "The reliability of the statement in question can, in turn, be fleshed out in any number of ways. For instance, it may be necessary that a speaker's statement be sensitive, safe, properly or virtuously formed, and so on. Accordingly, it may be necessary that a speaker would not state that *p* if *p* were false, or that she would not state that *p* without it being so that *p*, or that her statement be offered by testimonial faculties functioning properly or virtuously, and so on."

⁷ This view is developed in Lackey 2008 (chapter 3). For a precise formulation of the view see Lackey 2008, 73-75.

lying or insincerity will be cases where a hearer cannot gain true beliefs or even knowledge.⁸

Initially, the statement view appears better equipped to explain why Stella's case counts as an instance of appropriately licensed testimony. Even though Stella does not believe that p , her statement " p " stands in the right relation to the truth. Moreover, there are facts about Stella that factor in the analysis that, in principle, give hearers positive reasons to accept her testimony. For instance, that she has researched evolution and developed reliable lecture notes. From this fact, we can see that her statement was reliably issued and thus allows the students to form warranted beliefs even though Stella believes that evolution is false.⁹

While I think the Stella case nicely illustrates that belief is not required for licensing testimony, I find the statement view to fall flat with respect to accounting for particular facts about Stella that make her testimony genuine. It is difficult to explain, on the statement view, what exactly licenses a speaker to report things that are known to be true when they do not believe what they report. If it is only the speaker's standing in the right relation to truth (where that relation can be unknown to the speaker), then it seems that speakers do not need to have any particular regard for the truth in order to testify. If speakers do have a regard for the truth or accurate representation of a view, it makes

⁸ Consider the following case. Bertha suffers an unfortunate accident that causes a lesion in her brain. The lesion causes her to lie about her experiences of animals. During a visit to her doctor, the doctor discovers the lesion but finds that the lesion cannot be repaired. The doctor's solution is to create another lesion, where this second lesion will cause Bertha to be routinely deceived about the animals she sees. For instance, when Bertha sees a dog she forms the belief that what she sees is a cat. The doctor keeps this result from Bertha. After the procedure when Bertha sees a dog she believes she sees a cat, but when she testifies about what she sees she lies and reports that she saw a dog. She consistently lies with respect to her beliefs, but her statements are true. On the statement view, a hearer gains a true belief from Bertha even though she is a serial liar. See Lackey 2008, 53-54.

them better testifiers, but it is not a requirement on speakers to do this.¹⁰ In other words, that Stella goes to the library to research and learn about evolution and develops her lecture notes plays little to no role in relation to her asserting propositions about evolution. It appears as though a speaker could sincerely utter any true proposition and as long as there are no defeaters for the hearer, the hearer would have warrant for the resultant belief. What is missing from the statement story is the piece of the puzzle that licenses the speaker to utter *p*.

This is where my view, the *Understanding View* (UV) picks up the baton. The general claim I am defending is that in order for a speaker to testify to *p*, the speaker must stand in the right sort of licensing relation to *p*. I claim that what will put a speaker into the right relation is for the speaker to be in some epistemic state in relation to *p*. Such states will include, but are limited to belief and/or knowledge states. They will also include states like understanding, which I think can be partitioned from both belief and knowledge. This position rests between the traditional view and the statement view. Proponents of the traditional view would agree with the general claim that an epistemic state is needed to license testimony, but would disagree that a state like understanding could do the job. Proponents of the statement view, then, would at least agree that belief and knowledge are not necessary to license a speaker's testimony. Given that the statement view is a reliabilist view, a proponent might reject the idea that testimony needs to be licensed internally (that is, that the speaker needs to be aware of what licenses their

¹⁰ Lackey suggests that one might restrain the types of statements that speakers can make. Thus it may be a requirement of statements that they be sensitive, safe, or virtuously formed (Lackey 2008, 74). But this is a constraint on whatever reliable cognitive faculty generates testimony, not on the subject. My complaint here is that there seems to be some requirement on the subject such that they are directly responsible for the statements they testify to.

testimony) because, on that view, all that a speaker needs is a reliable testimony faculty (whatever that happens to be).¹¹

The plan for the rest of the paper is to defend the understanding view by showing that understanding can license testimony. One important aspect of understanding is that, unlike knowledge, understanding does not require an agent to believe or judge that what is understood is true of the world. Thus, as I will argue in the following section, I maintain that in the Stella case, she has an understanding of evolution and that this licenses her testimony to propositions about evolution. She understands evolution while maintaining a belief that the theory of evolution is false. This will be carried out against the backdrop of two objections, the objection from deception and malfunction and the objection from the Knowledge Norm of Assertion. These objections threaten any view which purports to deny that belief is a necessary condition for licensed testimony. If it can be shown that understanding can license testimony in the face of these objections, we will have strong support for the understanding view.

¹¹ “Faculty” need not be a spooky mental entity. All I think is meant by the term in this context is the specific dedication of cognitive or epistemic resources to analyzing testimony.

Section 2: Understanding and the Objections from Deception and Malfunction

2.1 *The Objections from Deception and Cognitive Malfunction*

The Stella case offers a paradigmatic example of an agent who appears to be properly testifying, but does not believe what she testifies. In the literature surrounding this case, two concerns have been raised that both inquire after whether or not hearers in this case really have warrant for their beliefs.

The first concern is that Stella is cognitively malfunctioning. When Stella learns about evolution, she notes that there is significant scientific evidence in favor of evolution, yet she does not revise her beliefs in a way that reflects what she learns. Not revising one's beliefs to fit what one recognizes as good evidence is irrational; Stella's cognitive faculties have malfunctioned.¹² She does not provide warrant for her students because her irrationality provides the students with a defeater. This will be true even on the statement view.

Second, it appears that by Stella's own lights she is deceiving the children. She believes that the propositions about the theory of evolution are false; thus when she asserts such propositions to her students, she testifies to a proposition that she judges to be false. It appears as though she intentionally allows for her students to form false beliefs (from her vantage).¹³ If Stella is willing to deceive the children then, even on the Statement View, that would defeat the student's warrant for their resultant beliefs.¹⁴

2.2 *An Account of Understanding*

¹² Audi discusses this objection in his 2006, 30-31.

¹³ For Audi's discussion of this objection, see his 2006, 28-29. Here Audi also points out that the teacher, Stella, in our case, is motivated by job security. Thus there are other motivations that seem to be overriding good epistemic practices, which itself should make us wonder about how much stock we should put into Stella's testimony.

¹⁴ The sort of defeater in question is what Lackey calls a *normative* defeater. That is, the children ought to have this defeater but in virtue of some other conditions, they fail to have it. In this case, it may be that Stella has in fact been reliable until the discussion of this particular subject and this appearance of consistent reliability is blocking the defeating condition. For Lackey's discussion of defeaters, see Lackey 2008, 44-45.

These are serious concerns and there are, no doubt, agents whose testimony is undermined by scenarios present in these objections. What I aim to do here is show that by appealing to the relation of understanding to testimony, that Stella's case does not fall victim to these objections.

Let's consider some examples of what I mean when I attribute understanding to an agent. When an IT person diagnoses and sets about fixing a bug in the operating system of one of her officemate's computers, we would say that she has an understanding of how the computer and the operating system works (which would include understanding a variety of ways in which the system might fail). Similarly, we would attribute understanding to an enthusiastic literature student who could put Shakespeare characters into varying counterfactual scenarios. The IT person has a set of information to draw upon when her co-workers come to her with troubles; the diagnosis is the result of seeing the appropriate connections between information. In case of the literature student, she has learned the particular quirks of Shakespeare's characters and plays such that she could imagine how they might act in a range of scenarios not written in any play. The common thread here is that these agents draw from a body of information and, seeing connections in that information, use that information to solve novel problems or explain the connections between the pieces of information. These agents understand, which as I see it and to put it somewhat boldly, is cognitive mastery of a subject.¹⁵

Let's apply this to the Stella case. Here, Stella goes to the library and learns about evolution from reliable sources (e.g. textbooks) thereby building a base of information.

¹⁵ This is instep with Zagzebski's linking understanding with *techne* (Zagzebski 2001, 241) and something of a departure from what one might find in the philosophy of science literature, where understanding is often linked knowledge and explanation. For more on the rift between the epistemic and philosophy of science notions of understanding see Grimm 2012 and Pritchard *forthcoming*.

We can imagine her sorting out the connections between what she reads, perhaps by posing questions to herself and consulting the books for the answer. Once she has developed her lecture notes and testifies to the class, we might say that she has an understanding if she, like the IT person, can give reasonably correct answers to her students questions about evolution, especially if those questions are novel (which may just mean novel to Stella at the time). If she sorts out the connections and can answer novel questions, it should give us pause when one suggests that she is not licensed or is testifying derivatively. Cognitively, she appears to be doing much more than that.

While this informal characterization of understanding aids motivation of the project, it will be helpful to situate my view of understanding within the current literature. I endorse a *representational view* of understanding, in contrast to a *species of knowledge* view.¹⁶ The species of knowledge view, briefly, claims that understanding amounts to knowledge of causes (if S understands why x is the case then S knows that x is the case because of y). That view appears to be unable to capture the variety of uses we appear to have for the term ‘understanding’, where the representational view (reviewed below) appears to be more suited to the task.¹⁷ Briefly, on the representational view an agent, S, understands some object, o , if S has a representation of o , which is the result of a successful cognitive action. I discuss objects and successful cognitive action in turn.

¹⁶ Here I will not provide a defense of my endorsement of the representational view. As I understand the two views, I think the representational view better captures the common usage of the term “understanding.” Thus I adopt representational language to better express the technical points that crop up around understanding and testimony. It may be that other ways of understanding understanding can be used towards the same end I am working toward.

¹⁷ Pritchard describes the ‘species of knowledge’ view as “knowledge of causes” where “to have an understanding of why X is the case is to know why X is the case, where to know why X is the case is to know that X is the case because of Y.” (forthcoming 1). Pritchard notes that knowing and understanding often come apart from another. For example, a scientist might know that chemicals a and b react to form chemical c , but lack an understanding of why when a and b react with one another that c occurs (forthcoming 2).

An object of understanding should be understood rather broadly to mean anything that can be the subject of inquiry. This is broad enough to capture one's saying she understands a scientific theory, some isolated singular fact, aesthetic objects, and skill-based actions, like how to build chair.¹⁸ Of the sorts of things listed, in order for an agent to have an understanding of them that agent must be in possession information relating to the target object of understanding. For example, if S is to understand why her house has burned down she needs to be in possession of information that is relevant to the event in which her house burned down (e.g. that there was faulty wiring and that that wiring was near some flammable material).

“Successful cognitive action” should be understood here as one's moving from a set of information to the formation of a malleable representation. By representation I mean a model of a target phenomenon (e.g. if S understands how the knight pieces move in chess, S has a mental model of the knight and the different ways in which it can be moved across a chess board in varying situations).¹⁹ Forming representations of this sort results from being able to assess connections between the pieces of information. Thus, while S can know that her house burned down from faulty wiring, she may not understand why her house burned down; she may know that faulty wiring is the reason why her house burned down, but she may not grasp how faulty wiring could cause a

¹⁸ This list is not exhaustive of the sorts of things understanding might take as its objects. Zagzebski (2001, 242) and Wilkenfeld (2013, 998) discuss lengthier lists of potential objects of understanding. Wilkenfeld (2013, 1002-1007) shows how we might think of an agents understanding such objects on a representational account. Additionally, Kvanvig (2003, 188-189) offers a linguistic analysis of the different ways in which “understanding” is used and shows how the variance in linguistic use relates to variety in objects of understanding.

¹⁹ I help myself to Wilkenfeld's (2013, 1003) “as neutral as possible” stipulation of what exactly representations amount to with respect to understanding. He stipulates that representations are “computational structures with content that are susceptible to mental transformations.”

fire.²⁰ When S *does* grasp how faulty wiring could cause a fire, what S has is a modeling, from the relevant information, of how a fire could start from the faulty wiring.

Two further requirements on the resultant representation are (1) that the representation be open to revision in the presence of new information and (2) that the representation be such that the agent in possession of it can manipulate and/or explain it.²¹ With respect to (1), if S gains new information this information should be able to change the model based on the new information gained; this can either be corrective modification of the representation or it can enhance one's understanding of the target object. With respect to (2), it may help to return to the example of the burned house. When S understands that her house burned down due to faulty wiring, she represents to herself the wires in the house and can manipulate the representation such that she could see the possible ways in which the wire could interact with flammable material to generate a fire. An important feature to take note of is that, in principle, she could, if prompted, explain all or some of the features of this representation (i.e. what is understood) to another agent.

Recall Stella's case. In inquiring into a subject, an agent supplies herself with the pieces of information that could go on to be the basis of understanding of some object. The important next step for Stella is that she moves to assessing the information and building a malleable representation of evolutionary theory. As described above, we might think we have good evidence for attributing understanding to an agent when the agent can pass on that understanding to other people, which Stella does in virtue of preparing and

²⁰ I use the example, as Grimm (2012, 106) does to, to illustrate how knowledge and understanding differ. The example has roots in Pritchard 2010, 75-76.

²¹ Both of these conditions are suggested by representational accounts (see Zagzebski, 2001 section IV), but are explicitly present in Wilkenfeld's positive proposal. See Wilkenfeld 2013, 1002-1004.

delivering lectures.²² We might also ascribe understanding to Stella if she can field questions about evolutionary theory in a way where she is not simply falling back on the texts she's read. Thus, it would be good evidence that Stella understands if she could give novel answers to questions about evolution. Moreover, she might adjust her understanding if a student were to notice an inconsistency or other sort of error in what she testifies to.

At this point we may still wonder whether or not understanding requires belief. Sticking with Stella's case, we know that she does not believe that evolution is true. But if that is the case is there any way in which we say that she *really* understands the theory? Another way to see the potential problem here is to note that beliefs states are states that are characteristically aimed at truth. Without belief we might worry that an agent's understanding may not always be aimed at the truth.

There is a clear way out of this worry. Again note that beliefs *aim* at truth. As such, an agent's beliefs may not always track truth. Understanding works on a similar model. An agent may make connections and form a representation of some object *o* and misrepresent. This poses no significant problem to my view because, presumably, representations will have correctness conditions with respect to the target phenomenon being represented. In Stella's case, her understanding has nothing to do with whether she believes. What matters in that case is only that she correctly represents or models evolutionary theory. If her representation was generated from unreliable sources that, for instance, slander evolutionary theory rather than explain it, her model will misrepresent

²² Zagzebski discusses understanding in educational contexts in a similar way. See Zagzebski 2001, 245.

the target phenomenon.²³ The claim here is that even if an agent assesses the relationship between pieces of information, she can be wrong with respect to the target object and be denied any claim to understand the target phenomenon. The important thing to notice here is that belief is not required to explain understanding; one need not think that what one understands accurately models the world. In many cases it will help, but it does not appear to be a necessary condition.

Another point of interest with respect to the Stella case is that Stella, more than likely, understands creationism *and* evolution, but only believes that one of these theories is true. This may appear to be problematic, but I do not think that it is.

On the present view, for an agent, S, to understand some object *o*, S needs only to interact with a set of information, assess the connections that hold between that information, and develop an accurate representation of the phenomenon based on those connections. Judging whether or not that representation is true of the world is something wholly separate. We might say of an ideal learner that she would encounter information, develop a representation, and then judge whether that representation is true.²⁴ If we apply this to Stella's case, we notice that she learns (interacts with) information about evolution, develops a representation, and then, based on her existing commitments to creationism, judges evolutionary theory to be false. This, of course, returns us to the objections from deception and cognitive malfunction.

²³ There is a debate over whether understanding is factive. Zagzebski, for instance argues that understanding is not factive and that truth is related to understanding only indirectly. On her view understanding is representational and aims at comprehensiveness (Zagzebski 2001, 244-245). Conversely, Kvanvig argues that understanding implies that an agent has *knowledge* of what's being connected and as such understanding is factive (Kvanvig 2003, 190-191).

²⁴ To see this, reflect on a general instance of learning. Consider Hector a student who has never encountered ethical theory before enrolling in an Introduction to Ethics course. Let's stipulate that Hector is fairly discriminating when it comes to his own beliefs and withholds judgment when presented with new information. As he reads about utilitarianism, he withholds judgment about whether utilitarianism coheres with his existing moral beliefs until he sees how the theory is developed and how it handles problem cases.

2.3 *Understanding as a Way Out of the Objection from Deception and Malfunction*

First, I return to the malfunction objection. The charge is that Stella is cognitively malfunctioning because her beliefs about evolution are insensitive to the evidence in favor of evolution's truth. It may be the case that she is guilty of not revising her beliefs with respect to what she deems is good evidence in favor of evolution, but this does not jeopardize the warrant her students have with respect to her testimony. The license of her testimony, with respect to propositions regarding evolution, is tied, in this case, to what she understands, not what she believes or reasonably should believe. That is, when she speaks from her understanding of evolution, she is speaking from her correct representation of evolution. It simply does not matter what her other doxastic practices are with respect to her testimony.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. Wanda, a properly functioning cognitive agent, is out for a casual stroll when a large branch that has fallen from a tree hanging over the sidewalk strikes her. This accident has the unfortunate effect of rendering her unable to revise her beliefs. Wanda will maintain whatever beliefs she had up to the point of the accident. Additionally, she is able to both learn new things and form new beliefs. But once Wanda adds a belief to her stock of beliefs she will be unable to revise that belief. Wanda will likely be saddled with a largely inconsistent set of beliefs and thus will not be a reliable source of information *if* she reports from her beliefs (she may sincerely believe p and not- p). But if the view of understanding on offer is right, she can still learn new information and accurately understand (or form accurate, malleable representations). She still has cognitive successes with respect to understanding; she can accurately represent. Since understanding can be separate from belief and thus doxastic

practices, success in understanding can license testimony independent of either. Thus, when Wanda testifies from her understanding she is a credible testifier, but is hopelessly unreliable when she testifies from her beliefs. Similarly, even if Stella fails to revise her *beliefs* to accord with what she takes to be good evidence, it is irrelevant with respect to her testifying to propositions about evolution because those are licensed by her understanding of evolutionary theory.

Let us turn our focus to the objection that Stella is a deceiver. Since she believes that evolution is false, it seems as though when she testifies to any proposition regarding evolution she, by her lights, intentionally misleads the children into forming false beliefs. One way to clearly see the objection is to note that Stella believes not-*p* but asserts *p* and this should be suspect. I think this objection can be resisted by appealing to understanding and examining the conversational context of Stella's testimony.

Call the proposition "*homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*" *E*. Stella believes not-*E*. Independently of her belief that not-*E*, she understands –has a correct representation of– evolutionary theory which she gained by consulting and engaging with a legitimate body of information on that subject. By her understanding evolutionary theory, she is licensed to testify that *E* and this is wholly independent of whether or not she believes *E*. The cognitive work that goes into understanding, as noted above, does not require that agents believe the information that ultimately enables the formation of a representation. Thus, Stella *believes* not-*E* and *understands* a phenomenon that suggests *E*.²⁵

²⁵ Notice here that Stella is not guilty of inconsistency since she only has one belief in this case. That belief and understanding come apart in this way this may be considered more evidence against the charge of cognitive malfunction.

When Stella testifies that *E* to her students she is not attempting to transfer a belief to her students. She is offering her testimony in an instructional context where what is required of her is that she provides her students with correct information about evolution. It is clear that she has done that since *E* is something Stella is licensed to testify to given her understanding of evolutionary theory. The point is that testimony in general is about sharing and spreading information. On my view one must be in an epistemic state that licenses testimony. The two candidates available are belief or understanding. Licensing in any case of testimony is disjunctive (S must either believe or understand with respect to target propositions). An agent, S, is licensed to testify to *p* if S believes *p* or if S understands some object *o* such that *p* is included in or is a consequence of S's understanding of *o*. Stella avoids deceiving the students because she informs them about evolution based on her understanding. What she believes and what she may prefer the students believe is irrelevant given the case.

2.4 An Objection Concerning One's Belief that a Theory is Well Supported

While I have answered charges of deception and malfunction as applied to the Understanding View, there is another objection lurking about in the backdrop. Someone who holds strictly to the traditional view might claim that Stella's understanding the theory of evolution has no bearing on her testimony. Stella's understanding might enable her to better speak about the theory of evolution, but her having that understanding is not something that can license her testimony. All that Stella needs for her testimony to be licensed is to have the true belief that evolution is well supported by the available evidence. Such a belief would license Stella's testimony even if she did not understand evolution and was teaching by merely parroting textbooks from which she developed her

notes. Further, in cases where a view is not well supported by evidence we will be in a position to see that a speaker is not licensed to testify about such a view; such an agent would be spreading falsehoods which undermines the goal of communication. Let's call this objection *well supported*.

To better see how this objection works, let's work through an example case. First, notice how Stella's case generalizes. An agent, S, understands *o*, but believes that *o* does not accurately represent the world (i.e. S believes *o* is false). By virtue of S's understanding of *o* she is licensed to testify to propositions about *o*, which serve as a legitimate basis for a hearer to form justified beliefs about *o*. Someone who argues for *well supported* rejects that understanding can license testimony and maintains the further claim that S would only be licensed to testify to propositions relating to *o* if *o* is in fact well supported by available evidence and S believes that *o* is supported in this way. Now let's examine a case with parallels to Stella's: Kelly is a teacher who understands witchcraft and an associated theory which holds that witches are responsible for the generation and spread of diseases (in opposition to the germ theory of disease). Kelly meets all of the requirements for understanding. She has learned about witches from reliable and scholarly texts on the subject (including primary historical works and contemporary works in the history of the subject). She is able to provide novel answers to questions posed to her about witches and the witchcraft theory of disease and she revises her understanding of witches based new information she may encounter. When it comes to Kelly's beliefs about the existence of witches and the spread of germs, she maintains a belief that the witchcraft theory of disease is not well supported by the evidence and she firmly believes that the germ theory of disease is correct. Kelly, setting aside her beliefs

about the germ theory of disease, proceeds to testify to her students about the witchcraft theory of disease. The advocate of *well supported* will say here that this result is counterintuitive. Kelly is not licensed to testify to propositions about the witchcraft theory of disease because the theory is not well supported by the available evidence *and* because Kelly has the corresponding belief that the theory is not supported by the evidence.²⁶

The Understanding View, being disjunctive between the epistemic states that license testimony, can accommodate situations where a true belief about a view's evidential status may license testimony. In fact, it seems right that in cases of parroting a true belief about the evidential status of a theory may indeed explain how such a speaker is licensed. But to wholly accept the conclusions of *well supported* is to lose the Understanding View. What this would amount to is to drop the notion that understanding can license testimony and, at best, understanding only serves to aide the ebb and flow of communication. That is, a speaker who understands *o*, in the sense of understanding sketched above, would be a better conversant about *o*, but understanding *o* does nothing to license talk of *o*. Certainly it is true understanding aides the ebb and flow of communication, but I reject the implication that S's having an understanding of *o* does not enable the licensing relation.

Let's return to the Kelly case. As is, while it may seem counterintuitive for Kelly to talk about the witchcraft theory of disease we can easily imagine contexts where it is acceptable for Kelly to testify to witch propositions, namely in a history class. In this context it is difficult to see how Kelly's true belief about the apparent falsity of the

²⁶ Thanks to Kelly Trogon for pointing out this objection and suggesting a case of this kind.

witchcraft theory of disease is doing any licensing work. What seems to be enabling the student's belief in an educational context is the fact that Kelly has some claim to expertise on the subject of witches and the witchcraft theory of disease. What explains her expertise? It is her understanding of the subject matter; Kelly's case functions just the same as Stella's case.

Kelly's case, as is, seems to be easily overcome, but I do not think that this will assuage what may be the deeper difficulty here. Suppose that we modify Kelly's case so that she understands witches and the witchcraft theory of disease but she believes that the available evidence supports such a theory (or believes something to the effect that the witchcraft theory of disease is in fact correct). Surely, we may want to say, in this case Kelly is not licensed to testify to witch propositions. Perhaps controversially, I here want to say that Kelly is licensed to testify about witches. She may have the facts wrong, but she has an understanding of witches and the witchcraft theory of disease. Recall the point of Wanda's case above; even where one's belief forming mechanisms are faulty one can still have a correct understanding. Doxastic practices can be and often are separate from what one understands.²⁷ Kelly, in the modified case, has false beliefs about witches, but her understanding of witches enables her to testify about witches. That is, hearers who hear her speak about witches will receive accurate information about witches and the witchcraft theory of disease. Hearers are enabled to form justified beliefs about this subject matter based on Kelly's testimony. The onus is on the hearer to sort out whether

²⁷ Perhaps a case that may be familiar to the philosopher is presenting different philosophical theories to students. An ethics professor may be an ardent utilitarian, but is still understands and testifies about Kant's ethics. Or a philosopher of mind may subscribe to eliminative materialism but, perhaps grudgingly, understands and testifies to various dualist positions.

her justified beliefs about witches are best supported by the available evidence. The point is a speaker with false beliefs may be licensed testifies when she understand *o*.

Section 3: Epistemic Personation and The Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA)

3.1 Getting to Know the Knowledge Norm of Assertion

I now turn to an objection concerning the nature of assertion. We may wonder what connects the epistemology of testimony to assertions. The answer is straightforward. Assertions are speech acts that are meant to convey information in conversational circumstances where conveying and obtaining information is the goal. An epistemology of testimony aims to understand under what circumstances a speaker is licensed in testifying to p and under what circumstances a hearer is entitled to form beliefs as a result of a speaker's testimony. When S testifies to p , S is asserting p (though it may be that not all assertions are acts of testimony), so the linguistic rules of proper assertion will bear on legitimate and licensed testimony. Thus, if we think that the transfer of knowledge is intimately connected with proper assertion, we will also think that knowledge is intimately connected with genuine cases of testimony (and hence, our analysis of Stella might ultimately turn on whether she will count as a proper asserter in the evolution case).

A standard view regarding assertion claims that for an agent to properly assert p , that agent must know p . Call this the Knowledge Norm of Assertion (KNA). Here I want to briefly motivate why one might accept the KNA by considering two ideas that appear in the literature. First, there is linguistic evidence that suggests that the KNA is operational in standard discourse. For instance, when a conversant is skeptical that a speaker's assertion is true, they challenge the speaker by asking things like "how do you know that?" This is an explicit challenge for one to justify the assertion or provide evidence for the assertion (or, perhaps, to have the speaker give a causal history of the

origin of their belief in order to establish its credibility).²⁸ There is a general sense in which hearers hold speakers responsible for assertions that they make, and what licenses assertions is that the speaker knows that *p*.²⁹

A second reason for thinking the KNA is correct is that it provides intuitive explanations for why some assertions are improper. Generally, when one is in a position to know that *p* one has the license to assert that *p*. Thus the KNA neatly and simply explains that assertions borne out of Gettier cases, lottery assertions, and Moorean paradoxes are improper because the agent could never be in a position to know that *p*.³⁰ The KNA also captures why it often feels difficult to assert that *p*; that is, why agents sometimes feel hesitant to assert some proposition *p*. In many cases asserting *feels* difficult because assertion occurs in conversational contexts where it is demanded that one's conversational contributions be truthful. In this contexts there is a justificatory burden placed on the agent. If S asserts *p*, S should be able to justify *p*'s truth. When an agent knows that *p*, she is in possession of justification that *p*.³¹

²⁸ See Williamson on this point (2002, 252-253).

²⁹ We might also think of Grice's maxims as laying the groundwork for these sorts of challenges. If the quality maxims, "Do not state what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that which you lack adequate evidence for" (Grice 1989, 27) are invoked, it seems to follow naturally that a hearer, doubtful of a speaker's assertion, demand how the speaker knows. If the goal of conversation is to exchange accurate information, hearers expect those offering the information to only offer accurate information where they can justify how they know it is accurate.

³⁰ Lottery assertions, for example, will straightforwardly not count as proper assertions because in such cases S could not possibly know that any given ticket will not win, even when S has good statistical evidence. The KNA intuitively explains why a speaker is improperly asserting when she asserts a Moorean proposition. In these cases where a speaker asserts a proposition of the form "*p* but I do not know that *p*" the speaker could not know both conjuncts. So even if the statement happened to be true, the speaker could not properly assert it on pain of irrationality. When S fails to know that *p* (as she would in the Moorean or lottery cases), when she asserts that *p* she is doing so improperly (for more on this see Williamson 2002, 249-254) With respect to Gettier cases, when S sees the only barn amongst the barns in Barn Façade County her belief is obtained through environmental luck which is incompatible with knowledge, thus should she assert that she saw a barn she will be improperly asserting.

³¹ Williamson discusses a similar point about agents have a responsibility for justifying *p*. He claims that speakers must have some authority to assert that *p* which is granted to them when they have adequate evidence for *p*; see Williamson 2002, 257-258. DeRose talks about the difficulty associated with asserting that *p* by saying that more often than not, we do not know when we are in a position to assert. His discussion factors into a larger discussion about how the KNA is compatible with contextualism; see DeRose 2002, 179-187.

The KNA, like the *traditional view* of testimony, captures an important relationship agents ought to have when they testify or assert. This is what I have been calling the licensing relation. In order for an agent to assert that p , an agent must stand in the proper licensing relation to p , such that they act as a guarantor of p 's truth. I think that it is a requirement on agents with respect to assertion and testimony that agents are in a licensing state, but if what I have argued about licensing and understanding is correct, the KNA is false because it restricts the licensing state to knowledge. In what follows I will show how an agent who understands (and does not believe) could appear to meet the requirements of the KNA, but fall short by the lights of the KNA.

3.2 License-Identical Agents and Epistemic Personation

From the start, it will not be my aim to show that Stella, in any technical sense, has knowledge of evolution; because she does not believe any propositions about evolution, she has no claim to knowledge in this case. What I mean to argue is that when Stella understands she has *just as much* license to assert propositions about evolution as a counterpart who does know evolutionary propositions. That is, Stella is *license-identical* to her counterpart who does know evolutionary propositions.

To be precise, when two agents are license-identical those agents possess the same information and would justify some proposition p by appealing to the same reasons or evidence. That is, when two agents S and R possess identical (or near identical) justificatory states with respect to p , those agents are license-identical.

Consider another teacher, Stanley, who develops a nearly identical lesson plan to Stella's, from the same reliable sources she consulted. The only difference between Stella and Stanley is that the latter believes (and knows) propositions about evolution, where the

former does not. We can add to Stanley's epistemic states that he understands evolution just as well as Stella does. Thus, Stella and Stanley have the same, nearly identical, features that go into understanding. The *only* difference between these two agents is that Stanley believes the target propositions (and in the right circumstances, has knowledge) while Stella does not. Further, no hearer would be able to discern any difference between these two agents. Due to both agents' correct understanding of evolution, both could justify any proposition either might offer. Thus, Stanley and Stella are *license-identical*.³²

If it is true that Stella and Stanley are license-identical in the way described, then they appear to all possess the same license for asserting *p*. Yet, by the KNA, only Stanley's assertions will count as proper assertions because Stella lacks knowledge. But if Stanley and Stella are license-identical with respect to *p* then it should be right to say that Stella is in the same epistemic position, functionally, as Stanley. That is, Stella appears to have the same justification for asserting *p* as an agent who knows that *p*. For present purposes, Stanley and Stella's justification for *p* has an intimate connection with their understanding of evolution. Stella has *identical* justificatory states resulting from *an identical* understanding of evolutionary theory. Stanley and Stella are both licensed to testify that *p* and in the ears of any hearer, both would appear to know that *p*. Call this appearance relation *epistemic personation*.³³

³² We may have some reasonable worries regarding differences Stella might have with Stanley. For example, it would be unlikely that they each thought the same information was relevant and thus may differ slightly on what they built their understanding from. If it is helpful, one may swap Stanley for Stella* who is in all respects identical to Stella save for the crucial difference that she (Stella*) does believe that evolution is true. Thus Stella* both believes and understands evolution and Stella and Stella* are *license-identical*.

³³ The name calls back to an idea that can be found in the work of Hobbes. For Hobbes, *personation* is an ability that human beings have in virtue of being language users to express the desires of others. Personation in Hobbes is used in part of a theory of action and factors into his ideas on *natural* and *artificial* persons. Natural persons are such that they have the capability to represent the wants and desires of artificial persons, which may be group entities. It is in the spirit of this that I borrow the term.

Epistemic personation occurs when an agent appears to have knowledge, but in fact lacks it. This term may initially arouse some suspicion, but I do not think that it should, at least with respect to agents who stand in proper justificatory relationships to the propositions they assert. In order for epistemic personation to do any positive work, the agent epistemically personating *needs* to stand in a proper justificatory relationship. Again, consider Stella's assertion "*homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*." Here, Stella has the license to assert *p* because she stands in a proper justificatory relationship, the identical relationship with respect to her counterpart who does know. Thus when her students hear her, she appears *as if* she knows. One can epistemically personate and fail to stand in any justificatory relationship to *p*. This may lead to what might be termed "epistemic illusions;" but wrongful personators can be discovered as a conversation continues. When we challenge people by asking, "how do you know that?" wrongful personators will likely come up short in terms of justification. Contrast this with Stella, who understands evolution and thus can explain what justifies her assertions.

Let's return to the objection under consideration. Even with all of the work understanding can do in terms of justification, Stella will fail to meet the requirements of the KNA. Her assertions are not licensed by knowledge and thus will fail to count as proper assertions. If the KNA is so strict that it could not allow for Stella to assert propositions from her correct understanding of evolution, the KNA is simply false. The argument for license-identity shows that when an agent correctly understands some object *o*, but does not believe that *o* accurately represents the world, she is in a state which is nearly identical with an agent who correctly understands *o* and does believe that *o* accurately represents the world. That is, both agents are licensed to make assertions

about *o*. Believing that *o* actually represents the world is not necessary for being entitled to make assertions about *o* if *o* is a successful representation. An agent only needs a correct representation to make assertions about that representation; thus Stella is licensed in making assertions about evolutionary theory. If the KNA cannot accommodate this; that is, if the KNA rules out epistemic personation, then the KNA does not capture all instances where assertion is intuitively permissible and gives us reasons to doubt the truth of the KNA.

I have only a suggestion for what could possibly replace the KNA. The attractive features of the KNA are that it explains our conversational practices and why we do not think certain paradoxical statements could be true. It also nicely illustrates the need for a strong epistemic licensing relation with respect to agents and what they assert. Any replacement norm should be able to capture this, but be flexible enough to capture any state that can license an assertion, which includes understanding. We would encounter a problem, however, if we were to offer something like the Epistemic State Norm of Assertion, where an agent is licensed in asserting *p* when she stands in the right sort of licensing relation to *p*. We may think that belief does some licensing work on it's own, but we significantly weaken the bar for assertion if mere belief can license assertion. Assertions, in some sense, are statements made that track truth. With understanding, we get something stronger than belief. When S understands *o*, *o* has correctness conditions. Stella would fail to properly assert anything about evolution if she lacked the understanding she has; like a mere believer, she may accidentally get things right. But assertion requires more than that. Knowledge and understanding appear to put agents in

the right relation to assert p . But it is an open question whether other states can do the same, so we are left without an answer to what should replace the KNA.

Conclusion

The stated aim of this paper was to advance and defend the Understanding View of testimony. The main claim that I advocated and defended here is that a speaker who understands some subject *S* is licensed to testify to propositions entailed by the speaker's understanding. In Stella's case, since she understands evolution she is licensed to testify to propositions such as "*homo sapiens* evolved from *homo erectus*" (provided her understanding of evolutionary theory includes information that entails that such a proposition). This result shows that the traditional view of testimony is too strong and the statement view too weak since neither can capture the licensing relation in terms of an agent's understanding. I take this to show that licensed testimony requires that agents back their testimony with an epistemic state (either a belief or understanding state), which shows that the statement view of testimony is false.

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