

Epistemic merit, autonomy, and testimony

Jesús VEGA ENCABO

BIBLID [0495-4548 (2008) 23: 61; pp. 45-56]

ABSTRACT: In this paper, it is argued that both the informer and the hearer in a testimonial situation deserve epistemic merit insofar as they contribute to the collaborative achievement of sharing knowledge. The paper introduces a distinction between the ideals of self-sufficiency and epistemic autonomy. The autonomous exercise of our epistemic agency is very often carried out under strong conditions of epistemic dependence. Testimony exhibits a kind of social dependence that does not threaten the autonomy of the subjects that need to consider their own epistemic capacities. When involved in a testimonial situation, both speaker and hearer declare, at least implicitly, the standings they occupy in an epistemic space and are obliged to recognise certain epistemic requirements.

Keywords: merit, testimony, epistemic autonomy, virtue epistemology, epistemic perspective.

1

The Kantian Maxim “Think for oneself” represents the enlightened ideal of an autonomous intellectual life. The maxim requires of the autonomous subjects to take into charge their doxastic acts. In order to do so, they should carefully examine the rational support of their believings and disbelievings. At the same time, the ideal seems to be committed to a certain version of epistemological individualism. The seat of knowledge is the individual agent that considers and reflects about the rational grounds of his beliefs. But what about beliefs acquired by testimony? Testimonies taken at face value seem to threaten intellectual autonomy. To defer to other’s authority entails to relinquish our epistemic responsibilities. To accept uncritically testimonies would infest our minds with old prejudices, arbitrary opinions, and false beliefs.

In this paper, I wish to introduce some distinctions that allow us to establish that the acquisition of knowledge by testimony does not affect to what I will call the epistemic autonomy of the agents. I do not equate the notions of intellectual and epistemic autonomy; but this is not the distinction I wish to pay attention to. Some versions of individualism promote the constitution of self-sufficient epistemic agents. In a sense, when we include testimony as a basic source of knowledge acquisition, it is the individualist ideal of epistemic *self-sufficiency* that is challenged, not the epistemic *autonomy* of an agent who exerts his competences in a testimonial situation.

I will introduce this distinction in the context of a recent discussion about the kind of merit the epistemic agent would deserve when she *accepts* others’ words. Many virtue epistemologists have recently pointed to the close link between knowledge ascriptions and credit attribution when acquiring a true belief. Insofar as knowing is viewed as a certain achievement by the virtuous agent, he seems to deserve epistemic merit. This achievement is understood, within virtue epistemology, as the outcome of an exercise of certain epistemic dispositions; and the true belief that amounts to knowledge is due to this exercise.



But there is a powerful objection against such views of knowledge: it is easy to identify cases in which one acquires knowledge by testimony without credit attribution. Does the receiver of a testimony contribute, in any relevant sense, to the *correctness* of the acquired belief? If the correctness of the belief crucially depends on the testifier, at least regarding what is epistemically significant, then it does not seem that the receiver contribute in any significant way that would justify credit attribution. My diagnosis of the problem will be that the epistemic dependence displayed in this kind of situations does not threaten the agential condition that gives some sense to the autonomy of the epistemic subjects involved in the testimonial act.

I will propose that testimony results in an epistemic achievement which all the participants deserve epistemic credit for. Given that this achievement is only possible because of the interdependence displayed by both speaker and hearer, the merit will depend on the respective epistemic contributions of each participant. I will also suggest that it is mistaken to think about epistemic agency under the idea that an individual has to be self-sufficient in assessing what supports the correctness of a certain belief, because there could be many significant aspects in a given situation that escape the control and accountability of the subject. So it is reasonable to introduce the distinction I mentioned above: autonomy (as opposed to heteronomy) is not equivalent to self-sufficiency (as opposed to dependence). Therefore, it is possible to conceive of a situation in which a subject exerts her epistemic autonomy under conditions of epistemic dependence. This is so in testimonial cases.

I will proceed in the following way. First, I will present the challenge that Jennifer Lackey has introduced against what she calls the *Deserving Credit View of Knowledge* (Lackey 2007). I will discuss, secondly, several possibilities of defense of the idea that in testimonial cases the knower (receiver of testimony) also deserves credit. I will then describe the testimonial situation as that in which the receiver adopts a certain epistemic perspective. I will end with my own diagnosis about Lackey's challenge and present briefly the distinction between epistemic autonomy and self-sufficiency.

2

In this paper, I adopt the framework of a virtue epistemology: knower's achievements are to be assessed not only in terms of the acquisition of true beliefs but also in terms of *how* the agent gets the truth. A virtue theory accounts for the correctness of our belief as *due* to the epistemic competences (virtues) of the subject. To this extent, the correctness of the belief is *attributable* to the knower and she deserves a certain credit for her achievement.¹ The fundamental values governing our epistemic performance cannot be reduced to the systematic connection to the truth; the subject is concerned with how the truth is attained. There is a merit attributable to the agent that depends on the success

¹ In this paper, I will use interchangeably the notions of credit and merit. I am going to assume that those acts worthy of credit or merit reflect assessments of praise and blame. Nevertheless, I don't think one should also be committed to the idea that those acts creditable to the subject have also to be *accountable* to the subject. The agent is not required to be able to *account* responsibly for her achievements in order to be worthy of praise and blame in the sense I am using the terms in this paper.

being the result of the exercise of an epistemic virtue. How truth is attained *due* to a competence of the epistemic agent adds some value to the true belief and makes the subject worthy of merit. In some theories, to the extent that the acquisition of a true belief excludes some kinds of luck, the true belief amounts to knowledge.

Consider the following quotations: “We do not want just the truth that is given to us by happenstance, or by some alien agency, where we are given a belief that hits the mark of truth *not* through our own performance, not through any accomplishment creditable to us” (Sosa 2003, p. 174). Or Greco about how to understand knowledge attributions: “one of the central functions of knowledge attributions is to give credit for true belief. When we say that S knows *p*, we imply that it is not just an accident that S believes the truth with respect to *p*... We mean to say that getting it right can be put down to S’s own abilities, rather than to dumb luck, or blind change, or something else” (Greco 2003, p. 116). The idea in these quotations is the following: the normative status that is constitutive of knowledge is the status that makes the knower creditable.

Jennifer Lackey, in a recent paper, characterizes in the following way what she calls the *Deserving Credit View of Knowledge* (DCVK):

CREDIT: If *S* knows that *p*, then *S* deserves *credit* for truly believing that *p*.

DIFFERENCE: The central epistemic *difference* between knowing that *p* and *S* truly believing that *q* merely by luck is the credit that *S* deserves for truly believing that *p*, but lacks for truly believing that *q*.

VALUE: The additional *value* that *S*’s knowing that *p* has over *S*’s truly believing that *q* merely by luck is the credit that *S* deserves for truly believing that *p* and lacks for truly believing that *q*. (Lackey 2007, p. 346)

Lackey argues that this account is mistaken because there are cases in which we are disposed to *attribute* knowledge without being so disposed to consider that the subject is creditable in any relevant sense. Her decisive case against this view appeals to a basic testimonial situation. As I have said, the idea behind credit attribution has to do with the epistemic competences of the subject playing a role in *accounting* for the correctness of the belief that *p* when the belief is true. But in testimonial cases, which is the contribution of the receiver’s competences to the explanation of the correctness of the belief? Lackey’s challenge is couched in common cases like the following:

Having just arrived at the train station in Chicago, Morris wishes to obtain directions to the Sears Tower. He looks around, approaches the first adult passer-by that he sees, and asks how to get to his desired destination. The passer-by, who happens to be a Chicago resident who knows the city extraordinarily well, provides Morris with impeccable directions to the Sears Towers by telling him that it is located two blocks east of the train station. Morris unhesitatingly forms the corresponding true belief. (Lackey 2007, p. 352)

Lackey’s argument is straightforward: whichever is the merit attributable in this situation, it is to the informer that is due and not to the receiver. The epistemic value of the belief acquired, when true, does not depend on the *cognitive resources* of the receiver, but of the informer. So Lackey draws the following conclusion:

because of testimonial knowledge’s *unique dependency on the cognitive resources of someone other than the subject in question*, what often does shoulder this explanatory burden are the faculties of someone other than the knower herself. (Lackey 2007, p. 356)

Only the competences of the testifier seem to be involved in a causal account of why it is correct the belief acquired by the hearer. The *epistemic* aspect of the achievement is due to the informer. The receiver acquires knowledge by testimony, but he does not deserve any epistemic credit for it. So the DCVK is wrong.

Lackey takes the case to be a rebuttal of the DCVK. I do not intend to challenge this rebuttal. This would require to give necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge attribution that would also allow us to exclude Gettier cases. And I do not want to discuss if merit attribution is enough to account for the value of knowledge over true belief. I am only interested in arguing that, if a receiver of a testimony acquires knowledge, it is also true that he deserves some credit for it. In principle, I will argue, there is nothing that suggest that knowledge attributions in testimonial cases are totally independent of merit attribution.

3

Let me briefly examine some possible responses to Lackey's challenge. The first one is introduced and answered by Lackey herself. Morris' case is compatible with a reductionist account of testimonial knowledge. According to reductionism, testimony by itself does not provide any ground for the acceptance of others' words. A certain positive support is needed if one wish to secure the obtaining of knowledge by testimony. That means that only if you assume a *non-reductionist* account on testimony, according to which testimony by itself represents a basic source of knowledge, it makes sense not to regard the receiver as worthy of credit.

Nonetheless, I think that Lackey is right in claiming that the significance of this case has nothing to do with the confrontation between reductionists and non-reductionists. The problem doesn't disappear simply by assuming that the epistemic merit of the hearer is grounded on the positive reasons she has for accepting others' testimony, as the reductionist claims. It is true that the hearer must have general knowledge of human psychology and the situation she is in order to motivate the possession of positive reasons to accept the report. But this is not the crucial point in discussion. What is important is that these reasons *would not explain* why Morris' belief is correct. They would just explain why someone like Morris would accept *any* testimony in the circumstances (Lackey 2007). The debate between reductionists and non-reductionists cannot just be about whether *in fact* the acceptance of a testimony is supported or not by certain reasons concerning the reliability of the informer. The question is rather whether testimony is a *non-reducible* epistemic source, that is, whether it provides a *positive and proper contribution* in the acquisition of knowledge, without requiring that testimonial support be completely *independent* of other rational considerations and information coming from other sources (Lackey 2006). What it is really at stake is what kind of understanding we have of the effective contribution of the hearer in *accounting* for the correctness of the belief acquired. And one does not need to assume that non-reductionists do not care about the role played by the hearer at all.

Secondly, one could attempt to rebut Lackey's objection by questioning the intuitions behind Morris' case. One way of doing it would consist in denying that Morris acquires knowledge. He is acquiring instead a true belief enabling him to get the Sears

Tower. Morris seems to trust the informer and act according to the confidence he has in him. But if someone will challenge his belief, his doxastic commitment would be quickly undermined. The value attributable to the belief would depend on the truth of the belief, and perhaps the value of the belief is rather constituted by the practical consequences than by the epistemic support the belief has for Morris.

Doubtless, Morris *seeks* to have some confidence in the reliability of the informer and considers that it could be a good way of acquiring knowledge. Practical success is supported by the fact that some knowledge is transmitted from the speaker to the hearer. But Plato's *Meno* had shown that for practical success true belief could be equally valuable as knowledge. In any case, there is no reason not to assume that the receiver is entitled to his belief that *p* by the fact that the testifier has assured him that *p*, even if the speaker could be misinformed or insincere. In a sufficiently good situation, this entitlement would amount to knowledge. So Lackey's challenge would be in place. What is the contribution of the receiver to the epistemic achievement in a testimonial situation?

Another way of questioning the intuitions would be to doubt whether it is really a case of testimony and, by extension, a case of acquisition of testimonial knowledge. We could distinguish between mere cases of transmission of information by social means and cases of genuine testimony. Our social world is plenty of mechanisms for spreading information. But only some situations where information is socially channeled are cases of testimony. In testimonial exchanges, a kind of epistemic cooperation between speaker and hearer is taking place, in which both participants are committed to preserve the adequate epistemic conditions for the hearer to acquire a true belief. Does Morris' case represent a situation in which an epistemic cooperation is actually taking place? That will depend on how we describe the situation. In principle, the fact that the speaker is intending to fill Morris' epistemic demands and the hearer is taking others' words as *prima facie* entitling him to acquire the belief supports the idea that Morris is engaged in a cooperative situation where a genuine epistemic exchange is taking place. So Morris' case is a basic case of epistemic cooperation and Morris acquires knowledge by testimony.

A third strategy will provide more positive answers to the challenge. Something positive must be said about the competences that would ground Morris' contribution to the correctness of the belief he is acquiring by testimony. The simplest way of doing it is by recognising the exercise by the hearer of a certain social competence. Testimonial acquisition of knowledge would be an achievement of the subject because the hearer exerts his competences and it is *in virtue of* this exercise that he acquires a correct belief. This strategy needs to say something else about the competence that is being exerted. In principle, it could be (i) a competence closely linked with our communicative abilities and our capacities of mind-reading. (ii) We could also suppose that the competence is a kind of social "monitoring" that help us to discriminate epistemic collaborators from non-collaborators. In our social life, we have acquired certain dispositions to trust and distrust people and we have learned several facts about what kinds of sources are credible or not. But if it is a mere interpretative competence, in what sense is epistemic merit attributable to the hearer? And if, on the contrary, it is a social competence for discrimi-

nating epistemic behavior, it is not clear that Morris is exerting it. Morris does not judge at any moment about the trustworthiness or the competence of the informer. He does not seem to ground his acceptance on the exercise of a “monitoring” competence that enables him to discriminate trustworthy informers.

A fourth response could be couched in the following terms: in testimonial cases, achievements are just *partially* attributable to the hearer insofar as his competence is “socially seated” (Sosa 2007, p. 93). We don’t need to suppose that there is a social unit that possesses the competence; it suffices with identifying the *joint* effort of speaker and hearer in accounting for how the hearer acquires a true belief from the speaker’s words. In a sense, credit corresponds to the group competence, but there is another sense in which the individual obtains a partial credit: “The correctness of one’s belief is still attributable in part to a competence seated in oneself individually” (Sosa 2007, p. 95). But if there is an individual contribution to the success insofar as it is grounded in the exercise of a competence “socially seated”, what is this contribution? Does it require a new individual competence? How does the competence seated individually contribute to the success of the testimonial act?

One possible suggestion is to require that the hearer be a reliable *receiver* of testimony (Greco 2007). Only in cases in which belief is the outcome of hearer’s activity, we are entitled to attribute knowledge (and epistemic credit). Thus the question trades again on the intuitions about Morris’ case. Lackey is confident that Morris acquires knowledge by testimony even if he chooses the first passer-by coming, that is, without engaging in any discriminatory activity which could support the idea of him as a reliable receiver of testimony. Is Morris involved in the correct way in order to deserve some credit? (Greco 2007).

Greco introduces an analogy with a football game in order to clarify the situation and not trade too much on the intuitions. A player receiving a pass which is worthy of merit because of its difficulty and beauty also deserves some credit for just scoring. As I have said, credit is deserved in a collective game, and depends on the abilities of each participant. So, not all credit, not all the epistemically relevant contribution, belongs to the informer (or the player passing the ball); the hearer, even if he just “catches” the words and scores, does contribute significantly to the success. What is excluded is a mere situation of scoring by luck. But I do not think that the analogy helps to clarify what Greco means by a “correct way” of accepting a testimony. He appeals to the fulfilling of the goals of the game. In the testimonial case, the receiver exerts the abilities that serve the purposes of practical reasoning. But this cannot be the last word, because why should not we suppose again that true beliefs could play the same practical role?

Two ideas I would like to retain from this discussion. First, it is necessary to acknowledge that the receiver is worthy of partial credit for his beliefs when it is a question of contributing to a cooperative effort. Second, if the hearer deserves credit in testimonial cases, it is so because the correctness of the belief is *also* attributable to a hearer’s competence. But if it is so, one needs to specify what kind of epistemic competences the receiver is exerting. Otherwise, intuitions about credit attribution would be called into question again.

4

This section briefly presents what I understand by a successful testimonial act. Testimony is a cooperative epistemic achievement. A virtuous process of knowledge acquisition by testimony requires the preservation of a social bond with a certain epistemic import (Broncano 2008). A testimonial act does not merely consist in extracting information from a social source. It requires that the participants exhibit a certain sensitivity to the epistemic conditions in which they are involved, in such a way that success be due to the interdependence created among the participants. So merit attribution cannot be but the outcome of this interdependence. A *part* of the merit corresponds then to the receiver of the information.

The specific contribution of the hearer has to be viewed in the context of the cooperation of both participants, insofar as they exhibit their respective condition of epistemic agents. They adopt first a perspective regarding to their own epistemic standings. And secondly they help to create a situation in which they have to recognise mutual epistemic responsibilities. Both participants generate and exhibit genuinely epistemic attitudes contributing to the success of the testimonial act. What we are interested in is the characteristic *epistemic* contribution of the receiver to the success of the testimonial act, that is, his contribution in terms of the exercise of his own competences. In order to explain it, I need to say more about what I understand by perspective-taking and generation of mutual responsibilities.

Perspective-taking is an attitude by which the subject shows a certain sensitivity to the position he occupies in the epistemic space. The subject's capacity of perspective-taking also involves the possibility of tracking the changes in the epistemic positions that are relevant to his epistemic life. Taking a perspective is a basic competence in *our* epistemic life, a competence that enables us to "manage" our epistemic standings in a space of interacting epistemic agents. Nonetheless, the exercise of this capacity does not need to be explicitly exhibited.

The idea of the creation of mutual responsibilities depends on how each participant exchanges epistemic claims in the testimonial situation. Let us review these exchanges briefly:

a) Who asks for information adopts and recognises an epistemic standing which claims of the testifier a certain attitude. This epistemic standing is characterised by a situation of epistemic dependence at least in two dimensions, a dimension of epistemic *poverty* and a dimension of epistemic *fragility*. Who asks for information avows and declares that he wants that the other knows that he depends on his position regarding a certain proposition *p* (Broncano 2008). In doing so, he assumes that the assertion of the testifier would and should be backed by reasons *he does not possess*. We don't need to suppose that the only way he would be entitled to accept the testimonial belief as true would have to be supported by evidential reasons that he could have either for the truth or falsity of the proposition or for the credibility of the informer, as if only *by* the acquisition of these evidences the testimony could have epistemic value. In fact, what it happens is that by adopting different epistemic standings, a situation is created in which the receiver himself shows that he will adopt an epistemic attitude of *trust* towards the other's words. In testimonial situations, there is involved an irreducibly

ble epistemic dimension that goes beyond the positive evidential support of the beliefs, and this dimension is manifested as the recognition by the participants that some epistemic positions effectively depend on the *lack of reasons*.

b) The informer on her side, insofar as she acknowledges the demands of a cooperative epistemic act, adopts an attitude in which she recognises the claims the other is making and the situation of epistemic authority he is in. In parallel to dependence, epistemic authority is characterised by the two contrasting dimensions of epistemic *richness* and epistemic *strength*. Who testifies for or against p recognises that the other depends on him to know that p and, because of that, he decides to endorse p (or not) through his assertion. It is also true that he must be sensitive to the lack of reasons of the receiver and the epistemic situation he is in. Hearer and informer exhibit their respective sensitivity to the lack of reasons of the hearer and the asymmetrical situation of authority/dependence created.

Morris' case belongs to a category of cases in which one seems to assume that only evidential factors for the belief are involved in epistemic evaluations deserving some merit. In Morris' case, the ground for acquiring the belief is not the evidence he possesses but the evidential reasons of the *other*, reasons that are not necessarily made explicit in the communicative exchange. So testimonial transmission of knowledge cannot be accounted exclusively in terms of the evidence available to the participants. As I have tried to suggest, it is the epistemic trust the receiver places on the informer (who at his turn has implicitly acknowledged the situation they are in) that contributes significantly to the success of the testimonial act.²

Now it is easier to explain the contribution of the hearer to the correctness of the belief he acquires by testimony. First, insofar as the testifier and the receiver *share knowledge*, success in testimony is not accountable in individualistic terms. It would be wrong to suppose that merit could be distributed among the participants in such a way that the merit of the hearer is insignificant compared with the merit of the speaker. But even if a distribution is possible, yet success, as I have said, is due to the interdependence of both participants. Merit in testimony is attributable to an epistemic cooperative act; so it has to be attributable to both participants, *if it is attributable to any of them*.

Is the contribution of the hearer epistemic? Sure, it is. Competences exercised in the testimonial situation reflect the dispositions of the subject regarding the truth of the beliefs she acquires. Both speaker and hearer declare, at least in an implicit way, the standings they occupy in an epistemic space. And both of them contribute to generate a situation under which they are obliged to acknowledge certain epistemic requirements. Briefly, success is due to the exercise of the relevant epistemic competences of both participants. And merit attribution depends on how each participant puts into play his own epistemic agency.

² Other papers in this volume emphasize appropriately the role played by trust in testimony. See Broncano 2008 and Origi 2008. The recent proposal by Richard Moran (2006) suggests that trust is not placed primarily in the proposition believed but in the person that assures the hearer that the world is like he claims to be. Obviously, the notion of trust can do its job in this context only if we suppose that it is not just the result of a mere calculus of rational expectations about the behaviour of other epistemic agents. If it were so, we will be faced again with an evidentialist conception.

5

How does merit attribution depend on exercising epistemic agency in testimonial cases? One possible objection to this line of reasoning comes from recognising that testimony massively depends on resources *external to the subject*, and that this is enough to “swamp” any contribution of the competences of the receiver to the correctness of the belief acquired, and consequently challenge the attribution of merit. Is not a testimonial case like a situation in which factors outside the control of the subject “force” the acquisition of a true belief, even in a very reliable way? Lackey reminds us a classical virus’ case in which the subject seems to acquire knowledge, though the belief is produced by the work of a highly reliable virus. It is true that in this kind of cases one would not be tempted to attribute any merit to the subject. So the issue is independent of the testimonial case. In general, when those aspects that contribute to explain the acquisition of knowledge are *external* to the agent, then merit attributions do not have any sense. And it seems also true that we can identify cases of knowledge where the relevant features to decide whether there is knowledge or not goes “beyond the scope of anyone’s reflective perspective” (Sosa 2006, p. 116).

If we can identify epistemic “achievements” under these conditions, then Lackey’s challenge seems definitive because there is no prospect for attributing credit. Besides, in answering the challenge, a too easy attribution of merit has to be avoided. Sometimes, in current language, we attribute blame (it is not so in cases of praise) when we identify some defects (not so easily in cases of identifying some perfections) in something or someone. If we would ground our notion of epistemic merit in attributions where we judge the perfection or defect of something or someone, to get some merit would be very easy. On the other side, I do not think that this caution entails that merit attribution makes sense only when the subject is *fully* responsible, that is, only when the subject can account before other people for his deeds. There is a possible middle ground to secure merit attribution, at least in epistemic matters. The theory of virtues makes merit attribution dependent on the evaluation of the agents to the extent that they exert their epistemic competences and abilities. Nothing prevents that doxastic agency be exerted under conditions which are not directly accessible to the voluntary control of the subject.

Testimony is not like the virus’ case. In this last case, what explains that we are not disposed to attribute any merit is that perhaps there is no genuine epistemic agency involved. And consequently, it would be difficult to ascribe any knowledge. I do not want to trade on the intuitions, but it seems obvious to me that there is a minimal condition present in the testimonial case that is absent in the virus’ case, a condition that I would call of attributability to the agent. Despite some external features playing a significant role in the receiver’s acquisition of a *true* belief in testimony, it is also true that this does not affect to his condition of epistemic agent that exerts his own competences. In other words, the condition of attributability is not just tied to a requirement of responsible control of our beliefs. And, at the same time, I take this condition to be sufficient for merit attribution to the extent that beliefs are the outcome of the exercise of agent’s capacities that are normatively stable.

In our explanation of what an *achievement* of an agent is, epistemic evaluations depend on how the agent himself is constituted. If a decisive dependence on external

factors would make unavailable the attribution of merit, then we could hardly explain how knowledge acquisition is in general a normative achievement. Only when these external factors affect to the identity of the epistemic agent, it is legitimate to raise some doubts about whether we should or not attribute merit. Merit depends on agency, and agency can be exerted under conditions of epistemic dependence on other epistemic agents. The value of testimony is dependent on the participants putting adequately into play their competences, because otherwise the cooperative success we have talked about would not take place.

The notion of knowledge as the achievement of an epistemic agent also serves to draw our attention towards the notion of epistemic autonomy, a notion that I will distinguish from a dubious ideal of epistemic self-sufficiency.

Remember again the tension raised by the attempts to include testimony within the basic sources of knowledge. On the one hand, there is a fully motivated fear that the subject will be tied to poor and even erroneous beliefs because of having adopted a questionable attitude of gullibility towards others' words. The Enlightenment ideal is the reflection of this fear. In order to escape credulity and the attractive of grounding our beliefs in dubious authorities, the maxim imposes to examine with puritan rigour any received belief. The maxim "Think for oneself" turns into the highest value of an *autonomous* intellectual life. Testimony, without rational guide, could place the agent in risky epistemological conditions. But, on the other hand, there is also a well motivated fear of falling into an extreme epistemic individualism that would threaten testimony as a basic source of knowledge and would not care enough about the social conditions of knowledge production and transmission.

I think this tension begins to loosen if we introduce a distinction between autonomy and self-sufficiency in epistemic matters. Elisabeth Fricker characterises in these terms what she calls an "autonomous" knower, and I will call a "self-sufficient" epistemic agent.

This ideal type relies on no one else for any of her knowledge. Thus she takes no one else's word for anything, but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties and investigative and inferential powers... The wholly autonomous knower will not accept any proposition, unless she herself possesses the evidence establishing it. (Fricker 2006, p. 225)

A self-sufficient epistemic agent only accepts a belief if it is supported by the evidence available from his own point of view. This ideal looks for the development of a purely individualistic epistemology: a self-sufficient knower is an individual knower. What kind of agent is promoted by this ideal? An agent that would encourage an attitude of suspicion in all those cases where we *should* defer our epistemic decisions to others. But a systematic attitude of suspicion would be highly irrational, mainly because it would affect to our own condition as epistemic agents. It would make more likely to have paranoid agents, diminished in his own epistemic capacities. I am supposing that, in a certain sense, a condition of *epistemic dependence* is significant for the adequate exercise of our epistemic agency. This idea could have two different readings which I would like to mention briefly: first, it could mean that it is part of our constitution as epistemic agents to be subject to conditions of epistemic dependence; second, it could simply mean that situations of epistemic dependence in cases of testimony are fully compatible with the exercise of our epistemic agency. This last condition is sufficient for running

my argument, though it is clear to me that the choice between both interpretations could have decisive consequences for the project of a social epistemology.

My claim is that there is a notion of *epistemic autonomy*, orthogonal to the ideal of self-sufficiency, that contrasts less with the idea of dependence than with the notion of *heteronomy*. The terminology has a Kantian flavour at this point. I don't have space to enter into the details of different conceptions on autonomy, but I will add some provisional notes about it. I don't need to take "autonomy" as a capacity of self-legislation in Kantian terms. There is a notion of autonomy that could be derived from a certain theory of virtues, according to which an epistemic agent is autonomous if he reveals certain aspects of his identity through his own acts.³ I think that at least two dimensions are clearly involved in a characterisation of epistemic autonomy in these terms.

First, it is necessary to suppose a certain stability and appropriate integration of the knower's faculties and competences. An epistemic subject cannot be a mere bunch of faculties, even if they are highly reliable. In order to attribute virtues leading to knowledge, we need to suppose that the subject is appropriately constituted and is able to put jointly into work all his epistemic competences. This dimension of the autonomy explains how the subject is entitled to exert the appropriate abilities to form beliefs and how this fact contributes to the success in his epistemic activity.

Second, the agent must be able to adopt a certain epistemic standing towards his own achievements. He must be able to take himself as a knower that weights his own abilities in each epistemic situation he is involved in. It is a normative fact of our epistemic constitution that we are sensitive to this condition of being a knower. In a certain sense, this dimension recovers the Kantian intuition that, as cognitive beings, we also act by the *conception* we have of our own epistemic condition, even if we are not legislators governed by an epistemic rational will.

As I have said, this notion of autonomy does not contrast with a notion of dependence, but with a notion of heteronomy. An epistemic subject could be affected in what entitles him to make a good use of his faculties and in what allows him to adequately regard his condition as epistemic agent. An heteronomous condition is brought about when certain aspects in the epistemic life of the agent prevents him from constituting himself appropriately as a knower, both at the level of the integration and stability of his faculties and competences and at the level of the perspective-taking on his own activity. The way *others* see and judge our epistemic work, for instance, could bring about conditions of heteronomy for the subject. Prejudices or attacks against the confidence we place in the exercise of our faculties can cause severe *defects* in our epistemic performance.

³ Let us add before leaving this question a brief remark about the contrast between the self-sufficiency ideal and the autonomy of an epistemic agent. It is not just a question about the respective importance of the seeking of evidence for assessing others' assertions. Obviously, a self-sufficient epistemic agent could yet defer to others' words, but the *significance* of this deference is explained in terms of a general attitude of suspicion. As expression of her epistemic identity, this attitude would tend to challenge continuously the value of deferring to others. That means also that autonomy—and the adequate exercise of epistemic agency in deferring to others—does not depend on taking others' words as authoritative just when sufficient evidential considerations are available. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pressing this kind of questions.

6

I have argued that informer and receiver in a testimonial situation are worthy of epistemic merit because of their collaborative achievement. To see that, it is enough to acknowledge that they are involved in the situation as full epistemic agents. They seek to share some knowledge. The condition of agency secures a certain *attributability* of the acts. There is no danger in including testimony within our basic sources of knowledge; the enlightened ideal of an autonomous epistemic inquiry is preserved, once we distinguish between the ideal of self-sufficiency and the exercise of autonomy tied to our achievements. Part of the epistemic merit we deserve as knowers is accounted in terms of the autonomous exercise of our epistemic agency. And this agency is very often carried out under strong conditions of epistemic dependence. So it is in the case of testimony.

REFERENCES

- Broncano, F. (2008). "Trusting others. The epistemological authority of testimony". *This volume*, pp. 11-22.
- DePaul, M., and L. Zagzebski (2003). *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, E. (2006). "Testimony and Epistemic Authority", in Lackey and Sosa (eds.) (2006), pp. 225-250.
- Greco, J. (2003). "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief", in DePaul and Zagzebski (eds.) (2003), pp. 111-134.
- (2007). "The Purpose of Knowledge and the Nature of Ability". *Philosophical Issues* 17/1, 57-69.
- Lackey, J. (2006). "It Takes Two to Tango: Beyond Reductionism and Non-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony", in Lackey and Sosa (eds.) (2006), pp. 160-89.
- (2007). "Why We Don't Deserve Credit for Everything We Know." *Synthese* 158, 345-361.
- and E. Sosa (eds.) (2006). *The Epistemology of Testimony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moran, R. (2006). "Getting Told and Being Believed", in Lackey and Sosa (eds.) (2006), pp. 272-306.
- Origi, G. (2008). "Trust, authority and epistemic responsibility". *This volume*, pp. 37-47.
- Sosa, E. (2003). "The Place of Truth in Epistemology", in DePaul and Zagzebski (eds.) (2003), pp. 155-179.
- (2006). "Knowledge: Instrumental and Testimonial", in Lackey and Sosa (eds.) (2006), pp. 116-123.
- (2007). *A Virtue Epistemology. Vol. 1. Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jesús VEGA ENCABO is Associate Professor in the Autonomous University of Madrid. Areas of interest in his research are normativity in epistemology, the rational role of experience and non-conceptual content, knowing-how and some topics in philosophy of science and technology, such as the relationship between science and democracy or the nature of artifacts and technological knowledge. He has recently published: "Appearances and Disjunctions. Empirical Authority in McDowell's Space of Reasons" (*Teorema*, 2006); "Truth and Moral Objectivity: Procedural Realism in Putnam's Pragmatism", in M.U. Rivas (ed.), *Hilary Putnam's Pragmatism*, Rodopi, 2007 (with Francisco Javier Gil Martín).

ADDRESS: Departamento de Lingüística General, Lógica y Filosofía de la Ciencia. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Ctra. Colmenar, km. 15. 28049 Madrid. Spain. E-mail: jesus.vega@uam.es.