

## Experts, Evidence and Epistemic Independence

Ben Almassi\*

### I.

Throughout his work on the rationality of epistemic dependence, John Hardwig makes the striking observation that he believes many things for which he possesses no evidence (1985, 335; 1991, 693; 1994, 83). While he could imagine collecting for himself the relevant evidence for some of his beliefs, the vastness of the world and constraints of time and individual intellect thwart his ability to gather for himself the evidence for all his beliefs. So for many things he believes what others tell him, as we all do. Epistemic dependence is the responsible choice, he argues, because he can be reasonably sure that those on whom he depends know more about the subject than he does. Epistemic dependence on experts is a smarter bet than epistemic autonomy: after all, Hardwig reasons, “if I were to pursue epistemic autonomy across the board, I would succeed in holding relatively uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore *irrational* beliefs” (1985, 340).

In this way, Hardwig says, rationality sometimes requires not thinking for oneself; indeed, rationality requires believing things for which one has no evidence at all (1985, 336; 1994, 84). Most provocative is his characterization of rational epistemic dependence and the justified beliefs attendant to it as blind (Hardwig 1991, 699; 1994, 86), a characterization Alvin Goldman finds distressing. “By characterizing the receiver’s knowledge as ‘blind,’ Hardwig seems to give us a skepticism of sorts,” Goldman argues. “The term ‘blind’ seems to imply that a layperson (or scientists in a different field) cannot be rationally justified in trusting an expert. So his approach would leave us with testimonial skepticism concerning rational justification, if not knowledge” (2001, 86). Yet Hardwig assures us that trust in expert testimony can yield both knowledge and justification.

In this paper I argue against what I call Hardwig’s *no-evidence thesis*: that knowledge and belief based on testimony are knowledge and belief for which the knower possesses no evidence. Against the no-evidence thesis, I propose we recognize that layperson B’s good reason to believe that expert A has good reason to believe proposition  $p$  constitutes evidence for B for  $p$ . I argue that the reasons Hardwig gives for the no-evidence thesis are inconclusive at best; at worst the no-evidence thesis coupled with his recognition of expert interdependence exposes him to recent criticisms by Stella Gaon and Stephen

---

\* Ben Almassi is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Washington. His dissertation deals with issues of expertise and epistemic trust in the generation and dissemination of scientific knowledge.

Norris. By rejecting the no-evidence thesis, we can recognize with Hardwig the importance of expert epistemic interdependence while avoiding the paradoxical implications of his position.

II.

I propose to grant Hardwig's claim that epistemic dependency is rational whenever one has reason to believe an expert's opinion is more reliable than one's own (1985, 341; 1994, 85). To the extent that experts report their opinions truthfully, one should trust the experts. But what makes this dependence blind? Why should we regard the resulting testimonial beliefs, even when justified, as beliefs without evidence? Hardwig asks us to consider two people A and B and proposition  $p$  for which A has evidence but B does not, where evidence for  $p$  is anything that "counts toward the truth" of  $p$  (1985, 336). Imagine that B has no independent reason to believe  $p$  but has good reason to believe A has good reason to believe  $p$ , where A *does* have good reason to believe  $p$ . In this way, Hardwig suggests, B thereby has good reason to believe  $p$  and, if  $p$  is true, even knows  $p$ . But B's knowledge that  $p$  is blind because B does not have access to A's reasons for  $p$ , which *are* the evidence for  $p$ : A has evidence for  $p$  and B even has evidence that A knows what she is talking about, but B possesses no evidence for  $p$  itself (Hardwig 1985, 345; 1991, 699).<sup>1</sup>

A testimonial reason for belief, then, is "a very odd kind of good reason for belief: a reason that does *not* constitute evidence for the truth of  $p$ " (Hardwig 1985, 337). Four reasons are given for this no-evidence thesis about testimony (Hardwig 1985, 337):

Although A's evidence counts toward establishing the truth of  $p$ , the case for  $p$  is not stronger after B discovers that A has this evidence than it was before B found out about A and A's reasons.

The chain of appeals to authority must end somewhere, and, if the whole chain of appeals is to be epistemically sound, it must end with someone who possesses the necessary evidence, since truth claims cannot be established by an appeal to authority, nor by investigating what other people believe about them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Goldman worries about testimonial blindness in the sense of B believing  $p$  without evidence for  $p$ ; Hardwig articulates blindness as B believing  $p$  based on A's testimony that  $p$  without knowing A's reasons for  $p$ . These accounts of epistemic blindness converge because Hardwig insists that A's reasons for  $p$  constitute the evidence for  $p$ . I thank this journal's anonymous referee for pressing me to further explicate this point.

Evidence that  $p$  counts against evidence that not  $p$ . But consider a case of conflicting experts: A who has evidence that  $p$ , and C, who has evidence that not  $p$ . In such a case if B believes that  $p$  only because he believes that A has good reasons to believe  $p$ , B's reasons do not count against C's; only A's do.

It would be possible to construct cases in which B has good reasons to believe that A has good reason to believe that  $p$  even where we would agree that there is no evidence for  $p$ .

It seems to me that the burden is on Hardwig to demonstrate that well-reasoned belief based on testimony is so evidentially different from well-reasoned beliefs based on memory, one's senses, or one's inferences from scientific instruments. Why think I derive evidence that it will rain today from observing clouds gather or a barometer drop, but not from a meteorologist's say-so? Hardwig's four reasons, I shall argue, fail to meet the burden of proof.

Let us consider the first reason. Must all evidence strengthen the case for  $p$  when added to another person's evidence? I do not think so. For one, there is no free-floating "case for  $p$ ," but cases for  $p$  for individuals or groups given the evidence available to them. Surely B's case for  $p$  is stronger after B discovers A, even if A's case is not strengthened; third-party C's case for  $p$  may be strengthened should B share this discovery with C.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, different cases for  $p$  are not always strengthened when evidence is shared. Consider this case: Lynn knows no one left the philosophy department party because she sat undistracted by the only exit the whole time and didn't see anyone leave, while Jack knows Larry didn't leave the party because they were chatting the whole time. Jack and Lynn each have evidence that Larry didn't leave, yet Lynn's acquiring Jack's evidence (or vice versa) would not strengthen her case for this fact. Or consider the proposition that 89 is not the largest prime number, where mathematician Leah's evidence for this fact is her proof that no largest prime exists while her student Ben's evidence is his proof that 101 is prime. While both have genuine evidence and Leah is an expert while Ben is not, neither case would be stronger should the two share evidence. Since not all evidence satisfies Hardwig's first criterion, further argumentation is needed if testimonial evidence is to be held to this standard.

Let us consider Hardwig's second reason. Must all evidence be such that a person who possesses that evidence can serve as an end-point for chains of appeals to authority? At most, it seems, what is required is that *some* evidence function this way, but not all evidence must be so interchangeable. The lesson to be drawn is to distinguish *eyewitness* from *hearsay* evidence, but drawing this distinction does not undermine the latter as a kind of evidence.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> This last point is addressed further in my discussion of Hardwig's third reason for the no-evidence thesis, concerning whether layperson B's evidence counts against expert C's evidence.

<sup>3</sup> I thank this journal's anonymous referee for suggesting the "eyewitness / hearsay" distinction.

Hardwig's third reason can also be challenged. Layperson B's testimonial reasons to believe  $p$  may not count much against expert C's reasons against  $p$ , but must they not count at all?<sup>4</sup> In some cases, where C's first-hand evidence against  $p$  is fairly weak and B's reason to believe A has reason to believe  $p$  is fairly strong, B's reason can count quite a bit against C's. Consider a variation on the philosophy department party example: this time Lynn has evidence that Larry has left because she sat by the door undistracted and watched him leave, while Jack has evidence that no one has left because he has not heard the usually squeaky exit-door squeak. Lynn informs Arthur that Larry has left; because he has reason to believe Lynn, Arthur believes accordingly. Both Lynn's eyewitness evidence and Arthur's testimonial evidence that Larry has left count against Jack's contrary evidence. Even if Lynn's evidence cannot be made available to Jack (perhaps Lynn is busy in another conversation), were Arthur to share his testimonial evidence, Jack would thereby have reason to reevaluate his belief that Larry has not left.

Hardwig's fourth reason rests on imagining cases where B has good reason to believe A has good reason to believe  $p$  when there is absolutely no evidence for  $p$ . But what does it mean to say there is absolutely no evidence for  $p$ ? Evidence is not free-floating, I suggest: evidence for  $p$  is evidence for  $p$  for a believer B given B's particular background beliefs and cognitive capacities. That I am in a blind man's line of sight is not evidence for him that I am nearby; written statements do not constitute evidence for those who cannot read the language. Two people can have evidence for and against  $p$  such that one person's evidence for  $p$  would not even constitute evidence for the other.<sup>5</sup> What counts as evidence for an expert is often unidentifiable as such for a layperson: for example, the goings-on under an electron microscope provide trained observers with a wealth of evidence where laypersons see only the inscrutable. Similarly, a layperson may justifiably take as evidence things properly dismissed from an expert perspective: for example, an amateur tracker may find evidence of a trail (broken twigs, trampled grass) while a skilled tracker more perceptibly

---

<sup>4</sup> I am specifically concerned here with whether testimonial evidence for  $p$  can count against non-testimonial evidence for not- $p$ ; I am not challenging Hardwig's claim that rationality often requires layman B to defer to the experts even in evaluating the merits of B's own criticisms of expert claims (Hardwig 1985, 342). At issue is not who should judge the merits of lay criticisms, but whether a layperson's testimonial evidence based on one expert's testimony counts against another expert's conflicting evidence. I thank this journal's anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify my position here.

<sup>5</sup> Consider the case of married Canadians Hannah and Sarah. Based on some suspicious credit-card statements Hannah suspects Sarah of adultery though actually Sarah is not cheating. For Hannah the credit-card statements causing her anxiety constitute evidence of adultery, but were she to confront Sarah with them they would not be evidence for Sarah of adultery. Sarah may recognize the statements as evidence for Hannah and see Hannah's fears as justified, but she needn't give any credence to the possibility of her own infidelity.

recognizes these clues as dead-ends.<sup>6</sup> So to say there is absolutely no evidence for  $p$  is to say that none of us have anything that counts toward the truth of  $p$  against the various backgrounds of our wide-ranging beliefs and abilities. It cannot merely be that  $p$  is false, as Hardwig allows that two persons at once may have evidence for  $p$  and not- $p$  respectively (Hardwig 1985, 337). It cannot be that B believes  $p$  on a whim, as by construction B has good reason to believe A has good reason to believe  $p$ . Frankly, one cannot appeal to the hypothetical case where B has good reason to believe A has good reason to believe  $p$  when there is no evidence for  $p$  without begging the question at hand: namely, whether B's well-founded testimonial reason to believe  $p$  thereby constitutes evidence for  $p$  for B.

In my estimation Hardwig's reasons why testimonial beliefs are beliefs without evidence are inconclusive. Instead, I propose we regard testimony that  $p$ , which B has good reason to believe, as evidence for  $p$  for B. Consider the parallel case of belief based on scientific instruments. Were A some usually reliable measuring device such as an oscilloscope or a triple-beam balance, the instrumental output of A would be said to provide its user B with evidence. Why should things be so different when A is human? I claim not that testimonial justification is in all ways the same as instrument-based justification, only that well-reasoned inferences from human and mechanical output should both be regarded as evidential. While testimony is not always sensitive (sometimes  $p$  is testified to even when  $p$  is false), neither is instrumental output. And while relying on human testimony exposes one to possible error and deceit while instruments are capable only of error, this fact does not explain why reasons to believe reliable human testimony should not count as evidence for the listener for the claim testified to.

### III.

"But regardless of how this dispute about 'evidence' is to be resolved," Hardwig says, "I would observe that B's reasons are logically dependent on A's" (1985, 337). But granting this point does not render the dispute trivial. Hardwig deems it "paradoxical and counterintuitive" (1985, 345) for B to know  $p$  without evidence of  $p$ ; it's not so odd, however, for B's evidence and knowledge of  $p$  to depend on A's evidence and knowledge of  $p$ .

Another reason for those with Hardwig to recognize testimonial knowledge as evidential is that this recognition allows one to avoid the charge of

---

<sup>6</sup> Some might characterize this as a kind of relativism about evidence, but note that this is not the same as nihilism about evidence or relativism about truth. My argument here does not even require that all evidence is relative, and relativism about at least some evidence is fairly unproblematic. Hardwig allows that experts A and C may at once have evidence for and against  $p$ , respectively; one of them will be wrong about  $p$ , but both have evidence for their conflicting views. Neither am I arguing that whether something counts as evidence rests on the believer's whim. That evidence for  $p$  is evidence for  $p$  for B given B's background beliefs and cognitive capacities does not mean B gets to decide what counts as evidence. I thank this journal's anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify my position here.

inconsistency made by Gaon and Norris. These authors argue that expertise involves a paradox, in that “the intellectual independence that is attributed to scientific experts is an ideal in which one necessarily trusts, but not an actual feature of scientific expertise.” (Gaon and Norris 2001, 187)<sup>7</sup> Gaon and Norris present this thesis as both a commentary on Hardwig specifically and a general diagnosis of the modern condition. I argue elsewhere that this apparent paradox can be avoided by rejecting the presumption that intellectual independence is necessary for expertise. The issue here is whether Hardwig in particular presumes experts’ intellectual independence even as he argues against it. My suggestion is that this charge sticks only given Hardwig’s commitment to the no-evidence thesis.

Gaon and Norris grant Hardwig’s claim that rationality often demands epistemic dependence. The problem, they allege, is that this claim “presupposes the very distinction between expertise and non-expertise that Hardwig undercuts in other parts of this analysis.” They continue:

“The argument that scientific expertise must be borrowed second-hand, because it is beyond the purview of most laypersons in any complex culture and because it is ultimately up to the experts to judge the relevance of appraisals made by non-experts, presupposes that the rationality of epistemic dependence hinges on there being someone who *does* have the relevant expertise and who *is* epistemically independent in the relevant way. According to this part of Hardwig’s argument, beliefs are said to be rational if they are based on the say-so of someone *else*, who has engaged in an independent appraisal of the evidence” (Gaon and Norris 2001, 191).

On this reading, experts worthy of trust must maintain intellectual independence within their domains of expertise. Yet as Gaon and Norris recognize, Hardwig takes great pains to show that even experts often must and often *should* rely on fellow experts: indeed, Hardwig says, “the expert is an expert partially because he so often takes the role of layman *within his own field*” (1985, 346).<sup>8</sup> There is no question that Hardwig rejects intellectual independence for laypersons and experts alike, but if his critics are right, his analysis of the rationality of epistemic dependence also presumes that there are intellectually independent experts for laypersons to rationally depend on. This is what Gaon and Norris mean when they call scientific expert trustworthiness “an ultimately unjustifiable ideal” (2001, 192).

This reading of Hardwig as at once rejecting and presuming experts’ epistemic independence is not without cause, I think, but only given his commitment to the no-evidence thesis. Recall that for Hardwig epistemic

---

<sup>7</sup> “Intellectual independence” is meant to function as synonymous with “epistemic autonomy” and antonymous with “epistemic dependence.”

<sup>8</sup> This sentiment is expressed forcefully when Hardwig writes, “Any attempt at self-reliance—even by the experts within their own fields—would be sheer folly” (1994, 85).

deference is rational just in case one justifiably believes the person to be trusted has better reasons than one has on one's own; what makes someone an expert just is that person's good reasons for her opinions, and what makes expert opinions better than lay opinions is their greater reliability. Thus rationality is not primarily a matter of being one or more steps from intellectual independence, but of deference to those whose reasons for belief are judged better than one's own. But how can layperson B have reason to believe putative expert A has good reason to believe  $p$ , in situations where B knows nothing about  $p$ ? "It's easy," Hardwig explains. "B has good reasons to believe that A has conducted the inquiry necessary to have evidence for believing that  $p$ "(1985, 337).

Herein lies Hardwig's susceptibility to Gaon and Norris's critique. Given the no-evidence thesis, in order for A to conduct the inquiry necessary for evidence for  $p$ , A cannot know  $p$  based on the testimony of other experts. Even when A has good reason to believe that her colleague C has good reason to believe  $p$  (an arrangement of expert-expert rational epistemic dependence that Hardwig urges us to recognize as quite common), the no-evidence thesis entails that expert A may justifiably believe  $p$  and may even know  $p$  but acquires no evidence for  $p$ . This puts layperson B in an awkward position, since it means that not everything expert A justifiably believes and knows about her domain of expertise is something A has evidence for. So either B must believe a fiction in deferring to A on matters within her domain of expertise, or B must rationally decline to defer to A in such matters, or B must somehow distinguish those expert-knowledge claims A knows independently (thus yielding evidence) from those expert-knowledge claims A knows through rational epistemic dependence on fellow experts (yielding no evidence). The last option, if possible, would be most appealing, but as a layperson, B can rarely be so discerning.

Let me attempt to restate the issue. Hardwig opens himself to Gaon and Norris's charge because of three things he says: (1) his no-evidence thesis, (2) his observation that experts often adopt the stance of laypersons even in their own domains of expertise, and (3) his explanation that layperson B has good reason to believe expert A has good reason to believe  $p$  when B has good reason to believe that A has conducted the inquiry necessary to collect the evidence for  $p$ . None of these claims in isolation commit Hardwig to a presumption of epistemic independence for trustworthy experts even as he tries to reject that presumption, but together they do. Why? Because the no-evidence thesis entails that when experts adopt the stance of laypersons within their domains of expertise by depending on other experts, the dependent experts do not acquire evidence for those parts of their domain that they know through rational epistemic dependence on their expert peers. For those parts of their domain, then, such experts fail to meet the condition explicated in (3), though they still meet that condition for those other parts of their domain that they know independently, since for those things they have acquired evidence.. But this arrangement puts layperson B in a bind, because in order to satisfy the condition explicated in (3), B must figure out which of those expert-knowledge claims A

makes actually originate in A's rational epistemic dependence on other experts (and thus for which B apparently should refrain from depending on A's testimony). Otherwise B is forced to rely on all of A's knowledge claims even while some of these are things for which A has collected no evidence, meaning that for those things B depends inappropriately (though B won't know which ones, of course); alternatively B is forced to refrain from depending on any of A's expert-knowledge claims so as to avoid relying on the claims for which A has no evidence.

Happily this problem can be avoided. It is forced onto Hardwig only given his presumptions that well-reasoned testimonial belief provides no evidence for the proposition believed and that B's rational epistemic dependence on A hangs on B's assessment of whether A has done the work necessary to acquire evidence for her testimony. Hardwig assumes epistemic independence of trustworthy experts even as he explicitly insists that experts frequently must act like laypersons within their own field, as Gaon and Norris charge, but only so long as he remains committed to the no-evidence thesis. If one instead allows that testimonial knowledge is evidential, the problem is avoided.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV.

My aim in this paper has not been the wholesale rejection of Hardwig's generally insightful work on epistemic dependence and the role of trust in knowledge. I mean to challenge his more specific thesis that a layperson's good reason to believe that an expert has good reason to believe proposition  $p$  can provide the layperson justified belief and knowledge of  $p$  but not evidence of  $p$ . This no-evidence thesis should be rejected because the reasons given in its defense are inconclusive, and because such rejection avoids the problem of expert epistemic independence. By recognizing that testimony can provide evidence, we can appreciate that epistemic interdependence among experts need not undermine their epistemic trustworthiness.

---

<sup>9</sup> I do not mean to suggest that abandoning the no-evidence thesis is the only way to avoid this problem. Another option might be to embrace fully the communalism toward knowledge and evidence which Hardwig suggests as a possible alternative (1985, 349).



*Acknowledgements*

I extend my deepest thanks to those at the University of Washington and Western Washington University, where earlier versions of this paper were presented, and to this journal's editor, Boaz Miller, and the two anonymous referees.

BEN ALMASSI  
511 Condon Hall, Box 353350  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Washington  
Seattle WA 98195  
+1.206.522.5007  
[balmassi@u.washington.edu](mailto:balmassi@u.washington.edu)

*References*

- Gaon, Stella and Stephen P. Norris. 2001. The Undecidable Grounds of Scientific Expertise. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35(2): 187-201.
- Goldman, Alvin. 2001. Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63(1): 85-110.
- Hardwig, John. 1985. Epistemic Dependence. *The Journal of Philosophy* 82(7): 335-349.
- Hardwig, John. 1991. The Role of Trust in Knowledge. *The Journal of Philosophy* 88(12): 693-720.
- Hardwig, John. 1994. Toward an Ethics of Expertise. In *Professional Ethics and Social Responsibility*, ed. Daniel E. Wueste, 83-101. London: Rowman and Littlefield.