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### Commentary on Goodwin

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# Commentary on Jean Goodwin's "The Authority of Wikipedia"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT GOODWIN'S PAPER IS *NOT* ABOUT...

At first sight, it might seem that, in "The Authority of Wikipedia," Jean Goodwin is going to deal with a very useful, specific and not particularly philosophical matter, namely, whether we should consult Wikipedia at all. Goodwin incidentally remarks that, for teachers, it is a hot issue whether Wikipedia is an advisable pedagogical device. And certainly, in general, it may be interesting to know whether consulting Wikipedia is something sound to do if we are looking for information. Such a kind of concern should be placed in the realm of practical reason, as it amounts to try to determine the adequacy and efficiency of a certain means—i.e. consulting Wikipedia- to a certain end—i.e. getting information about different topics. For this concern, the target question would be "is consulting Wikipedia a good deal indeed?," and the way to answer it would be an empirical research and the subsequent appraisal of its costs, risks and rewards as a source of information. But, this is not Goodwin's question.

There is a different concern that Goodwin's paper seems to address. This time, it is a concern belonging to the realm of theoretical reason, as it amounts to try to determine the theoretical correctness of the information that Wikipedia provides. For it, the target question would be "is the information conveyed in Wikipedia right or (sufficiently) justified?" and the way to answer it would be, again, an empirical research determining the fulfillment of certain epistemological criteria—namely, criteria sanctioning the theoretical correctness of the information that Wikipedia provides.

Remarkably, both determining the pragmatic adequacy of consulting Wikipedia as a source of information and determining the theoretical adequacy of the information that it provides can be said to be epistemological tasks. But the former is a matter of the correctness of the activity of consulting Wikipedia as a means to the specific end of having (sound, adequate) knowledge, whereas the latter is a matter of Wikipedia's intrinsic quality as an "alleged" corpus of knowledge. However, none of these tasks is Goodwin's main target –although, as I will argue in next section, the second one is part of Goodwin's main goal.

Rather, Goodwin says that she is going to "[...] consider a series of possible rationales for trusting Wikipedia, before proposing (her) own [...]" (2009, p. 3). The

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issue of the trustworthiness of Wikipedia can be seen as a matter of the theoretical adequacy of the beliefs that we acquire as a result of consulting it, but also of the pragmatic adequacy of consulting it as a source of information. But Goodwin is not primarily interested in considering whether Wikipedia is a good means for knowledge, nor does she try to establish the theoretical correctness of the information that Wikipedia conveys; at least, not directly. Rather, she aims at determining which criteria should we follow in order to determine, in turn, whether Wikipedia is trustable or not. And her contention will be that we “[...] trust Wikipedia on pragmatic, not on epistemic, grounds” (2009, p. 15). It is this main thesis what I would like to discuss in the following comments.

## 2. A TWOFOLD AMBIGUITY IN GOODWIN’S SECONDARY GOAL

There is a further remark to be made in order to properly characterize Goodwin’s project. For, at the beginning of her article, she also says:

I consult Wikipedia. I am, further, no epistemic slouch; in fact I consider myself prudent in deciding what to credit. The purpose of this paper is to reconcile these two facts, by articulating the rationale which will make my trust in Wikipedia not only reasonable, but manifestly so. (2009, p. 1)

As already said, Goodwin’s main goal is to provide an adequate rationale for determining whether Wikipedia is trustable or not. But, as a result, she will also try to show that Wikipedia is trustable indeed, so that she will be showing that trusting Wikipedia is “not only reasonable, but manifestly so.” However, in my view, the expression of the latter goal is ambiguous in at least two senses.

In principle, Goodwin seems to aim at redeeming the rationality of those who trust the Free Encyclopaedia, like herself. But taking into account the above distinction between the theoretical and the pragmatic epistemic justification of trusting Wikipedia, I think we would have to ask, first, whether she is talking about their theoretical or their pragmatic rationality. For the former would be a matter of answering the question “are those who believe what Wikipedia says right in believing so?” whereas the latter would be a matter of answering the slightly different question “are those who consult Wikipedia right in doing so, provided that they aim at getting information?”

I think this is an important distinction. For, on the one hand, it might be (theoretically) wrong from me to believe what Wikipedia says about, let’s say, dolphins—for example, because I think that Wikipedia is, in general, not very accurate—while it is (pragmatically) right from me to consult Wikipedia for getting information about dolphins. That would be the case, for example, if it happens to be a good option to start my research about dolphins by consulting the corresponding entries, but just as a starting point for further research. If I do so, I am still trusting Wikipedia as a means for knowledge. Actually, I think that’s the way we should endorse its pedagogical use.

And conversely, it might be (theoretically) right from me to believe what Wikipedia says about dolphins—for example, because I think that Wikipedia is mostly right—while it is (pragmatically) wrong from me to consult it. That would be the case if I have more accurate, more accessible, more fancy, more acknowledged, etc sources of information for my research. Arguably, this fact would partly explain the feeling that

there is something strange in a dolphin specialist seriously and instrumentally—that is, not for curiosity or fun, or for getting knowledge about Wikipedia itself, etc—consulting Wikipedia’s entries on dolphins. Goodwin herself seems to acknowledge this intuition by remarking that her consulting “Argumentation Theory” or “Informal Logic” was “out of curiosity” (2009, p. 8). Thus, even if we think that Wikipedia’s information is basically and mostly right, its generality and anti-expert style would tell against using it as a main academic source: specialists are supposed to use more “fancy” sources of knowledge... This is also something Goodwin seems to acknowledge when she mentions the despair with which many scholars see the possibility of consulting Wikipedia (2009, p. 2).

On the other hand, we have to take into account that, whereas the concerns outlined in section 1 were about the theoretical and pragmatic adequacy of Wikipedia as a source of information, the ones we are considering now are about the theoretical and pragmatic rationality of those who consult Wikipedia or believe what it says. Certainly there is a sense in which both pairs of question happen to be the same, namely, the sense in which saying of a person that she is (theoretically or pragmatically) right in doing or believing that  $p$  means the same as saying that  $p$  is (theoretically or pragmatically) right. But, in principle, we should not grant the identity of both types of questions. For we may want to preserve the idea that it might happen to be (theoretically or pragmatically) wrong to look at Wikipedia as a source of information or to believe what it says, while it was (theoretically or pragmatically) right for someone to do so, as long as it coheres with her beliefs and/or desires. This idea amounts to acknowledge that, in a certain way, people may be wrong and still being rational. And *vice versa*: even if what Wikipedia says were true or if it were an utmost valuable source of information, there is a sense in which it would be wrong for a given subject to believe what it says or to consult it, namely, the sense in which it would be unreasonable from her to believe what it says or to consult it as a source of information if she distrust Wikipedia or unreasonably prefers another source of information. This is just to gather the idea that, sometimes, we happen to be right just by chance.

Taking all this into account, I will contend that Goodwin’s goal of providing a rationale for trusting Wikipedia happens to be the goal of providing criteria for determining Wikipedia’s theoretical adequacy, i.e. criteria for determining whether what Wikipedia says can be taken to be (mostly) right. Following these criteria, she would try to show that Wikipedia is theoretically trustable indeed and, as a consequence, that those who consult Wikipedia are pragmatically right in doing so. In order to achieve the latter goal, however, Goodwin would have to presuppose not only that if a set of claims is theoretically correct, then those who believe them are theoretically rational, but also that if Wikipedia is such a set of theoretically correct claims, then it is pragmatically right to consult it as a source of information. But as argued above, these presuppositions are not warranted, so I would rather give up the analysis of the latter goal and focus just on the first and the second one<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, I think the following italics by Goodwin grant my decision: “I am going to presume here that reliance on Wikipedia *is* reasonable” (2009: 1). My guess is that Goodwin does not really aim at redeeming the reasonability of those who trust Wikipedia, but of Wikipedia itself (either as a means to the end of knowing, or as a body of “alleged” knowledge—i.e. as a set of claims). It may be difficult to admit that doing or believing something may be reasonable independently of its reasonability for someone. But, as argued above, we already endorse this distinction when we say that someone was right, but just by chance, or that she was wrong, but still rational. In my view, by saying that consulting Wikipedia *is* reasonable,

Now, regarding Goodwin's primary goal of showing that the adequate criteria for determining the theoretical adequacy of Wikipedia are "pragmatic, not epistemic," my main goal in this comments will be, in turn, to show that Goodwin is not really proposing "pragmatic" criteria for appraising Wikipedia's information, but what we should call "second order theoretical criteria." And as long as this contention might seem a merely linguistic matter, I would like to show that my proposed labels for "pragmatic," "theoretic" and "epistemic" are able to grasp some distinctions that Goodwin's aren't. This is indeed a poor criticism, which is another way of saying that, in general, I'm very sympathetic to the ideas defended in "The Authority of Wikipedia."

### 3. EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY. REDUCTIONISM AND ANTI-REDUCTIONISM

Goodwin locates the question of the epistemological status of our trust in Wikipedia within the realm of the epistemology of testimony. Roughly, testimony epistemologists hold two main—and commonly held as incompatible—positions. For the reductionist—Hume being a main withstander—in order to be justified in believing what others say we have to have (good) reasons for trusting them. On the contrary, anti-reductionists see testimony as self-justifying, that is, as something similar to other forms of direct judgment, like perception or memory, whose justification is rather a matter of not having reasons for disbelief.

Thus, for the reductionist, the theoretical correctness of a belief acquired by testimony would finally rest on different reasons warranting that, in a particular case, the testimony given is likely true. On the contrary, for the anti-reductionist, the theoretical correctness of a belief acquired by testimony is a matter of the *a priori* acceptability of the idea that it is theoretically right to believe others' assertions, unless there are good reasons to doubt them. Thus, no reasons would be needed in order to justify many of the beliefs that we acquire as a result of what others say to us. The *a priori* acceptability of such a thesis has been defended considering things like the constitutive conditions of asserting or the impossibility of massively attributing false beliefs.

But it is important to take into account that both reductionists and anti-reductionists discuss about the epistemic credentials of the beliefs that we acquire as a result of a very specific kind of testimony, namely, the case in which there is no salient reason to believe, nor to disbelieve, what the other says—like the testimony of a person that we meet in the middle of the street and, in being asked, tells us what time is it, or where is Boulevard Street.

Main possible reasons for disbelieving are the *evidence* that the witness aims at deceiving us, or that she is committing a mistake. But it is also a good reason for disbelieving the fact that what the speaker says is too controversial to be accepted without

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Goodwin is saying that, unless there are specific circumstances for particular individuals telling against it, we do well in trusting Wikipedia. In other words, I think Goodwin is making a claim about Wikipedia, she is saying something interesting about it, not about the peculiarities of those who consult it. Certainly, that means that what she would be saying about Wikipedia itself would be something quite close to what Locke called "secondary qualities," like colors, which depend on the existence of humans: that *x* is green is a property of *x*, given how humans actually are. But secondary qualities are perfectly objective.

further explanations, or that it is too strange or complex, or just incompatible with many of our beliefs<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, Wikipedia does not seem to be the type of testimony we could accept without further questioning, for it provides specialized information in a systematic way. Its claims are not like those of the person who tells us what time it is or where is Boulevard Street, for the complexity of its entries increases the probability that it contain, at least, some mistakes.

Goodwin herself acknowledges that “Wikipedia is of course an extreme case. In less extreme cases, we often have good epistemic as well as pragmatic reasons for relying on what others tell us” (2009, p. 15). Consequently, as long as Wikipedia is not the standard type of testimony about which reductionists and anti-reductionists discuss, the fact that Goodwin (and me) thinks that we need reasons to turn our trust in Wikipedia into a theoretically right one does not amount to adopt a reductionist conception of the justifiability of the beliefs that we acquire by testimony.

#### 4. GOODWIN’S EVALUATION OF THREE POSSIBLE RATIONALES FOR TRUSTING WIKIPEDIA

So, Wikipedia is not a standard case of testimony, and there is no possibility of *a priori* establishing Wikipedia’s trustworthiness or the rationality of the beliefs that we acquire as a result of consulting it. That is why Goodwin goes on to consider three types of rationales for determining the trustworthiness of the Free Encyclopaedia: the expertise of the individual author, the collective knowledge emerging from the sort of interactions that Wikipedia allows, and the success of past experiences of trust.

Regarding the possibility of justifying our trust in Wikipedia by considering the expertise of the individual authors, Goodwin says that:

the anonymity or pseudonymity of Wikipedia editors prevents us from assessing their knowledge; what we do know of these editors does not make us confident; and the anti-expert culture of Wikipedia doesn’t give us reason to believe that these conditions will change. The knowledge of individual contributors does not appear to justify our practice of consulting Wikipedia. (2009, pp. 4-5)

I think this is plainly right: the interesting thing about the Wikipedia case is showing that, in dealing with the epistemological status of the beliefs that we acquire by testimony, we do not deal with the trustworthiness of speakers themselves. Rather, as Goodwin insists recalling Moran (2006), we deal with the trustworthiness of their particular communicative actions at a given occasion; and the speaker’s general trustworthiness as a person is just one reason among others for trusting what she says at that time.

On the other hand, Goodwin notices, Wikipedia’s structure enables a very peculiar communicative practice, and she wonders whether the key of its trustworthiness could be, precisely, the characteristics of this practice, and particularly, the possibility for “the collective knowledge emerging from the sort of interactions that Wikipedia allows.” However, Goodwin says that “[...] it is not that Wikipedia fails to live up to the standards of “emergent social knowledge”; it is instead that these standards simply do not apply”

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<sup>2</sup> All these are *reasons* for disbelieving what someone says. Notice, on the other hand, that there are only two *causes* for a false testimony: that the speaker is wrong, or that she aims at deceiving us.

(2009, p. 7). For, as she argues, nothing in it grants the sort of Darwinian processes that would amount to a warrant for the outcome: the article that we finally read does not have to be the result of a progressive improvement of an original one or the survivor of an epistemological process. Rather, sometimes it is just “whatever the most recent editor decided to say and to leave alone” (2009, p. 6) or even a deceptive amalgam of incoherent opinions (2009, p. 7).

Finally, Goodwin argues against what we can take to be the most general criterion for trusting something, namely, the fact that, so far, it has been (mostly) right. This is a very special rationale for trusting something. For its warrant is an instance of the inductive principle itself: in thinking that it makes sense to try to justify the trustworthiness of a source inductively—i.e. that the fact that it has been trustable so far is a good reason to continue trusting it—we are thinking of this trustworthiness as a contingent matter. In my view, that explains why Goodwin would not really manage to avoid a certain appeal to the inductive principle as a rationale for determining the trustworthiness of Wikipedia. I am going to argue for this in section 7, but I would like to finish this section just by questioning Goodwin’s reasons for dismissing the idea that a good rationale for trusting Wikipedia is whether “we’ve found it useful and reliable in the past” (Goodwin 2009, p. 7).

Against this rationale Goodwin adduces, on the one hand, that we cannot use it because “as with many forms of testimony, it is difficult, or at least impractical, to test Wikipedia’s assertions against the facts.” But facts are not our only means for determining whether a given testimony is right: other testimonies already tested may also do the work. Actually, most of the times we test testimony not against the facts but against further testimonies, in a non-conclusive way. Arguably, that would be, precisely, the way out from the Socratic apparent paradox of expert testimony that Goodwin, mentioning Walton (1997), recalls: for it is not true that we cannot determine that a given subject is an expert unless we ourselves are experts too. Certainly, we cannot conclusively establish that someone knows what she says if we cannot determine that what she says is true, and if we ourselves are not experts, then we will not be able to tell by ourselves whether it is true indeed. But we can test the expert’s knowledge by asking others “alleged” experts about the same topic, and we can test her expertise by considering, for example, her credentials or the testimony of others about her very expertise. All this information would provide just an indirect and non-conclusive justification for believing in her testimony, but it may serve to justify believing so after all.

Goodwin also dismisses induction because, in her view:

there are many aspects of Wikipedia regarding which the more I find out about them, the less I trust. In many cases, however, these same features work pragmatically to encourage trust—and indeed, the more I find out about them, the more I trust. Take as an example the warning templates. Epistemically, every time I see a flag that the article I’m looking at is disputed, or that it lacks sources, or that it may be an advertisement—every time I see such a flag, my trust in the page, and in Wikipedia as a whole, should go down. By contrast, pragmatically speaking these warnings reconfirm that there is a community out there of people who care about quality. And the more prevalent the warnings are, the more I’m assured that the community is large, well-organized and working hard. (2009, p. 15)

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But we can think of Wikipedia's flags as qualified assertions: in that case, what we would have to check is whether the qualified assertions are correct, not whether plain assertions are correct. It is the qualified assertions what would count for determining the success of Wikipedia, not the bare assertions which, as the flags remark, should induce us to believe that there are many claims in Wikipedia that are wrong. In my view, what Wikipedia actually claims when it says "the article x needs further revision" is something like "x, but not in all its points."

Finally, Goodwin also says that we do not really use this rationale either. Certainly, we hardly ever "take a time out and explore whether Wikipedia's details are correct" (Goodwin 2009, p. 7). But the truth is that we test Wikipedia indirectly all the time, for we are permanently acquainted with its increasing success as a website, and this counts as evidence in its favour: if Wikipedia tended to raise bad results, it is unlikely that so many people, and in such an increasing number, continued consulting it. That is also quite a sound reason for trusting contemporary science, in general: if current developments usually raised bad results, it is unlikely that so many resources continued being devoted to them and so many technical and expensive projects depended on them. Of course, this is just a defeasible reason, but a good defeasible reason after all.

Actually, at this point Goodwin does not seem to argue against the inductive principle as a rationale; she is not saying that this is not a good criterion to test whether a given source is trustable or not. Rather, what she seems to say is that Wikipedia is trustable and, nevertheless, it does not meet this standard. However, I think Goodwin cannot be right that "the experience we do have of Wikipedia's accuracy is often bad—or at least disappointing" (2007, p. 8). It cannot be the case that this is the general outcome of our use of Wikipedia. For, if it were, people would not massively use it as a source of information, and if they did, they would be irredeemably irrational and Wikipedia could not be said to be trustable.

Besides, Goodwin says that "even if our experiences with Wikipedia were satisfactory, the "reductionist" approach cannot account for why it was legitimate for any of us to start consulting Wikipedia in the first place" (2007, p. 8). But I think this is also wrong: our first try with Wikipedia might have been done just as a *mere try* that, only after many satisfactory experiences, made us to come to believe that consulting Wikipedia was a good means to obtain information, or that Wikipedia's information was mostly right. Our first try would have been irrational if we had trusted Wikipedia without further information about its trustworthiness. But many of us already had some information about Wikipedia's success when we first consulted it. And most of the rest probably were not "epistemic slouch," but just curious people. All this, with the corresponding qualification for each case...

In my view, we do use an inductive rationale as a criterion for determining Wikipedia's trustworthiness. But here, induction does not pivot on our individual experiences, but on all its users' experiences. Moreover, according to this standard, Wikipedia seems to be trustable enough, and those believing in what it says who already know about its increasingly wild usage are rational in believing so.

But Goodwin does not think this is a good way of justifying our trust in Wikipedia:

None of these approaches makes consulting Wikipedia reasonable. At a minimum, they encourage us to be agnostic, since the information we'd need to assure ourselves is unavailable; in the worst

case, they encourage us to caution and distrust. Either trust in Wikipedia is unjustified, or it is justified on some other ground. But the premise of this paper is that we are right to consult Wikipedia. (2009, p. 9)

## 5. GOODWIN'S JUSTIFICATION OF WIKIPEDIA'S TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Goodwin:

The startling size of and activity around Wikipedia demonstrates that those who are creating it are deeply committed to the project of providing me with knowledge (indeed, with the sum of *all* knowledge). Relying on their conspicuous passion, it is reasonable for me to trust the Wikipedians, and consult Wikipedia. (2009, p. 11)

Maybe “demonstrates” is a little too big word, but at any rate, Goodwin thinks that the qualities of Wikipedians’ activity are the right standard to test the trustworthiness of Wikipedia. And she contends that, according to it, Wikipedia happens to be trustable indeed. In addition, she says that this is a pragmatic rationale for trusting something, as it leaves “aside consideration of what Wikipedians *know*, and examine instead what Wikipedians *do*.” (2009, p. 10).

I think it might be a good idea to replace the issue of the trustworthiness of testimony from the question of what does the witness *know* to the question of what does she *do*. After all, testimonies may be false not only because witnesses do not always know what they say, but also because sometimes they aim at deceiving us. But Goodwin’s point is deeper than this: what she says is that we should focus on the way witnesses present the information that they provide, not only as a way to test whether their intentions are pure (i.e. that they do not want to deceive us), but also as a way to test whether they will be able to accomplish such intentions (i.e. that they will be able to avoid mistakes).

Thus, Goodwin remarks that Wikipedians have a “conspicuous dedication to their project,” which is to provide us with “the sum of *all* knowledge” (2009, p. 11). And that would give us a *prima facie* reason to trust their intentions. However, she notices, being faithful to such an ideal may fail to be a reason to trust Wikipedia if its standards for acknowledging something as proper knowledge do not really qualify. Because of that, her second step is to test whether Wikipedians have an acceptable conception of knowledge. That is what she calls “the definition concern.” And she concludes that even though she cannot tell whether Wikipedians and herself are “in full agreement” about a definition of knowledge, she thinks that this is not necessary because “the massive effort that Wikipedians have conspicuously invested in policy-making gives me confidence that they share my concern for definition; it also suggests that whatever definition they have (currently) come up with is likely to be sophisticated and well-grounded” (2009, p. 12)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> At this point, the question of whether we are considering Wikipedia’s trustworthiness or Goodwin’s rationality in trusting it becomes relevant: maybe she is not right in being confident just with that “warranties.” In that case, the fact that this is enough for her would turn rational her trusting Wikipedia; yet, Wikipedia would fail to be trustable in itself. Anyway, I suppose Goodwin is not actually saying that Wikipedians’ activity makes her confident that they share her concern about the definition of knowledge, but rather that we *should* be confident.

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Yet, having adequate standards to determine what counts as knowledge is not enough to trust what Wikipedians say. For still remains open the question of whether they actually meet these standards. But Goodwin thinks that

Wikipedians have developed elaborate methods for policing contributions to the site from those who don't share their commitment to provide knowledge to the world" (2009, p. 13).

Moreover, according to Goodwin, Wikipedians are permanently working to overcome any pragmatic doubts that those consulting Wikipedia might rise,

by developing policies, practices, institutions, and technologies which function conspicuously to assure me that what I will encounter in a Wikipedia article is the work of people passionate about giving me free access to the sum of all knowledge (2009, p. 15).

To sum up, Goodwin says:

I do not have much idea of whether any particular Wikipedian knows anything. Nor do I generally bother to check how accurate the information in an article is. However I do know—because they insistently communicate it to me--what Wikipedians are trying to do. They tell me that “we love accumulating, ordering, structuring, and making freely available what knowledge we have in the form of an encyclopaedia of unprecedented size” (Wikipedia: WikiLove 2009). I can learn about the policies, practices, institutions and technologies Wikipedians have invented to insure that they achieve their goal, because they are not only transparent but conspicuously signalled to anyone visiting the site. Confident that the Wikipedians are committed to providing me with the sum of all knowledge, I have good reasons to consult the site. I trust Wikipedia on pragmatic, not on epistemic, grounds. (2009, p. 15)

### 6. ARE GOODWIN'S CRITERIA PRAGMATIC INDEED?

According to Goodwin, there would be a contrast between pragmatic and epistemic grounds for trusting something. She contends that an epistemic approach to the question of trustworthiness will “proceed directly to knowledge, assessing the expertise of the author(s) or the reliability of the site” (2009, p. 15), whereas the approach that she endorses proceeds indirectly, not by assessing “the expertise but the trustworthiness of the authors” (2009, p. 15), considering whether we are “licensed to rely on them to take care in giving (knowledge) to (us).” In this section, I would like to argue that we should not call such an approach “pragmatic” but, at it best, “second order theoretical,” for it amounts to rely on second order standards to theoretically justify the beliefs that we acquire as a result of consulting a given source. So, let me first propose a general conception of theoretical and pragmatic justification.

I think of the theoretical justification of a claim or belief as a matter of its correctness as a description of how things are. Contrastingly, the pragmatic justification of something (including a claim or a belief) would be a matter of its adequacy as a means to an end. Regarding their theoretical justification, the main problem with those beliefs that we acquire as a result of what others testify in standard cases is that they do not argue for it, i.e. that they do not provide reasons showing their claims to be correct. For if they did, we would be in a position to solve both the problem of whether it is theoretically rational for a given individual to believe what others says, and also the problem of whether what others says is (sufficiently) justified: the former would be a matter of the

coherence of the individual's appraisal of the reasons that the speaker offered for her claims, whereas the latter would be a matter of their actual goodness.

But, as it happens with standard cases of testimony, Wikipedia does not offer reasons for its claims; its entries are not argumentative, but expositive. However, we may still be theoretically justified in believing what it says. It is by dealing with this possibility that the question of the epistemological status of the beliefs that we acquire by consulting Wikipedia turns into the question of which reasons would grant its trustworthiness, and whether Wikipedia meets them. Goodwin's answer is to look at what Wikipedians *do*. And she says that this amounts to seek for a pragmatic account of Wikipedia's trustworthiness.

In ordinary life, we do trust others—and not always, or perhaps even often, on epistemic grounds. When I deposit my pay check in my bank, for example, I am not relying on my banker's knowledgeability to get it back to me with interest. After all, there's been plenty of evidence recently that at least some bankers are foolish. Instead, I am relying on my bank's contract with me, on the court system which allows me to enforce that contract, and on the federal guarantee which will hold me harmless if my bank collapses. Let's call this kind of reliance "pragmatic," since it involves assessments of what agents (my bank, the court system, the federal government) can be relied upon to do. (2009, p. 10)

But, does trusting our bank on these grounds really have the same type of justification as it has trusting Wikipedia because of what Wikipedians *do*? Trusting our bank is a good means to safely guard our money because there is a convenient balance between its costs, its risks and its rewards. Thus, I would say that we are pragmatically justified in trusting banks; they are a good deal for guarding money. But I wouldn't say that we are theoretically justified in believing bankers when they pretend that our money is safe in their hands. This belief might fail to be justified if we take into account that "there's been plenty of evidence recently that at least some bankers are foolish."

What about Wikipedia? In my proposed terminology, the sort of justification of Wikipedia's trustworthiness that Goodwin is looking for is not pragmatic but theoretical: she does not want to show that it is a good deal to consult Wikipedia when we want to know something; rather, she wants to show that Wikipedia's information is (likely) mostly right. Thus, when she proposes to look at what Wikipedians *do* she is rather offering a rationale for believing what they say. Call it as you wish, but there is a difference here between both ways of being justified in trusting something or someone: if we trust a plumber because he has a reputation, we are taking his reputation as a good reason to believe that he will probably do it well; but if we trust him just because he is offering a two years guarantee, we are not taking his offer as a reason to believe that he will do it well, but as a reason for preferring him to do the work, provided that other conditions do also hold. I think that, in order to grasp this difference between two ways of being right in trusting, we could say that, in the former case we trust on theoretical reasons, while in the latter, we trust on pragmatic ones.

Accordingly, we could say that Goodwin is proposing theoretical rationales for trusting Wikipedia, or if you prefer, that she is trying to determine the theoretical adequacy of the information that it provides. But not its pragmatic adequacy as a source of knowledge: for doing this, she would rather have to take into account its costs, risks and rewards as a means to the end of getting information, so that things like, for example, the fact that it is for free, that you need internet access or that it has a bad press in

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technical circles—by contrast with the Encyclopedia Britannica—would become relevant.

Yet, as mentioned above, Wikipedia's entries are not argumentative, so that we cannot establish their theoretical adequacy by appraising the reasons that Wikipedians offer for showing their claims to be correct. That is why we have to appeal to criteria that are not reasons showing the corresponding claims to be (theoretically) correct, but reasons to think that these claims might be so. In my view, we should call this type of criteria "second order theoretical": they are not reasons directly showing Wikipedia's claims to be correct, but rather reasons showing our beliefs in what Wikipedia says to be correct.

Let me illustrate this point by considering Goodwin's proposed criteria for assessing expertise opinion. She says that, if we adopt the pragmatic rationale for trusting testimony that she is proposing, we "should encourage students to be less concerned about figuring out who the "real" expert is, for example on climate change, and to pay more attention to the assurances that the competing experts are offering us. Critical questions for testing an appeal to expert authority might include:

Why is this person offering you their view?

Can you verify her intentions?

What does she have to lose if she turns out to be wrong?

Are there reliable enforcement mechanisms to ensure she will endure these penalties? (Goodwin 2009, p. 16)

But, as I see it, these questions are just attempts at dismissing one of the main reasons for not believing what another person says, namely, that she wanted to deceive us: by raising them, we are testing her sincerity. It is sensible to suppose that apart from testing her sincerity, we would also have to check whether the witness could be mistaken: for she might be a nice person but completely wrong... But then we are right back to the most traditional account of the justification for believing testimony. And I think Goodwin is right in saying that this traditional account does not work in the case of Wikipedia, precisely because of the "anonymity or pseudonymity of Wikipedia's editors" (2009, p. 4)

## 7. CONCLUSION

There is a further reading of Goodwin's paper. At a certain point, she seems to suggest that her "pragmatic" proposal would be able to shed light to the reductionist/anti-reductionist debate

As Richard Moran has argued in an important essay (2006), both reductionist and anti-reductionist accounts tend to ignore the act of testimony itself, treating it as merely a convenient instrument for detecting knowledge in other people's heads. If we had another method for finding out what others believe—e.g., an epistemometer—we might be able to dispose of testimony entirely. But that seems odd. Moran proposes instead that we must attend to what speakers are doing when they testify: namely, taking responsibility for the truth of what they are saying. He is urging, in other words, what I have here called a pragmatic rationale for trust. As I have argued, a pragmatic approach works much better than an epistemic approach in accounting for our ordinary practice of consulting Wikipedia. In Fred Kauffeld's terms (2003), the entire "speech act" that is Wikipedia—not just the page of an article, but the conspicuous evidence the site provides of all of the

Wikipedians' efforts—licenses a presumption that what I find there is worth consulting. This suggests that those pursuing projects in the philosophy of testimony should be paying more attention to the diverse and complex ways speakers can design their talk to provide auditors with reasons to trust. (2009, p. 16)

But how is this supposed to give a clue to solve the question of whether testimony is *a priori* trustable, which is the point of the discussion between reductionists and anti-reductionists? Certainly, the way a certain performance has been displayed gives us clues to believe/disbelieve that it is trustable. Such a rationale is, as argued above, a second order theoretical rationale for believing: even if we cannot know directly whether the speaker is right, we can still have theoretical reasons for believing her, namely, reasons showing our belief that the speaker is right to be correct. Among these reasons, we can take into account different features of her performance, including the way she presents herself. This is what Aristotle already called the *ethic* aspect of discourse. But good rhetoricians are supposed to be able to make us believe in their sincerity, expertise, etc, and taking this into account, we should be clear that, at their best, appearances are not enough, as Plato used to warn us against the sophists.

The trustworthiness of Wikipedia is not grounded on rhetorical but on epistemological criteria: the *ethos* of the speaker does not warrant our trusting her regardless of further considerations. People who behave as trustable people do normally speak the truth. But they may also be good deceivers, and we know it. We are not necessarily committed to believe people who look trustable. There is just an inductive rationale for trusting what looks trustable, neither a necessary, nor an *a priori* one.

In my view, we are right in trusting Wikipedia because there is an increasingly huge number of other people who use it as a source of “general” information. But if we came to know that we all were wrong about Wikipedia, continuing believing in what it says would be irredeemably irrational, no matter how trustable it seemed to us: the fact that Wikipedia looks trustable is just some evidence in its favor, an evidence grounded on an inductive principle such as “when people guard its claims, meet such and such standards, appear in such and such way, etc they *frequently* tell the truth.”

“Perceiving” or “remembering” are *a priori* trustable sources of information: if we know that a given subject has perceived or remembered that *p*, then we already know that *p* is true. Another type of *a priori* trustable source of information is that of codes of rules constitutively determining what is right or wrong from one or another point of view—like, for example, a legal system or the rules of a game. As a source of information about what is right or wrong, a code of rules is *a priori* trustable because there are only extrinsic ways of doubting whether it is wrong to do what the rules forbid: namely, either doubting whether we are facing the “real” code, or considering a different kind of wrongness, i.e. a wrongness determined by different rules<sup>4</sup>. An *a priori* justification of the trustworthiness of a given source is a justification that proceeds through a warrant that it is an *a priori* truth, such as “if someone has seen that *p*, then the belief that *p* is correct.”

I do not have a position regarding the reductionist/anti-reductionist debate; that is, I am not sure whether there is an *a priori* warrant showing our believing in what a witness says to be correct. But I think that, in any case, it is a contingent one: witnesses

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<sup>4</sup> That’s what we do when we wonder things like “is it *right* to do what the Law says we have to do?”

## COMMENTARY ON JEAN GOODWIN

are not necessarily trustable—our eyes or our memory aren't either, by the way. A necessarily trustable source of information is, for example, the Bible or the Pope, according to the believer. For them, it is not an *a priori* truth that if the Bible or the Pope says that p, then the belief that p is correct, as this is something that they came to know after God, allegedly, told them. Yet, they cannot disbelieve what it says; for them, it is impossible that this warrant is wrong. But Wikipedia is not the Bible. Actually, I think the best thing about this great project is that it has shown us that authority is not the ultimate reason to trust.

[Link to reply](#)

[Link to paper](#)

### REFERENCE

Moran, R. (2006). Getting told and being believed. In: J. Lackey & E. Sosa (Eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony* (pp. 272-306), Oxford: Clarendon Press.