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Knowledge by Telling: Reflections on the ad verecundiam

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1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps there is no more interesting epistemic fact about the human individual than that a great deal of what he knows he knows in virtue of being *told* it. Perhaps of equal importance is that virtually everything he knows depends on someone's telling something to someone else. Told-knowledge, as we might call it, is affected by two quite different models of knowledge. One is the Command and Control Model (CC-model) according to which—with the possible exception of the disclosures of observation and of, such as may be, other forms of immediate experience—knowledge is occasioned by our intellectual powers, and the knowledge-states that arise from their free exercise are states for whose occurrence we ourselves are responsible. An important feature of the CC-model is that it conceives of the attainment of knowledge as a kind of *case-making*. Any definition that makes justified belief a condition of knowledge incorporates this case-making aspect of the CC-model. The model also carries important presuppositions about the epistemic capacities of human knowers. In particular, it is assumed that knowing-agents are both spectators and judges of the considerations that constitute the supporting cases required for whatever it is that they come to know.

The CC-model has enjoyed a near-hegemonic standing in epistemology since that subject's earliest days. But in the past generation or so a rival position has presented itself. This is the Causal Response Model of Knowledge (the CR-model), of which the most prominent version is causal reliabilism. On pure versions of this view, you know that α if and only if α is true, you believe that α and your belief that α was formed by cognitive devices functioning on good information as they should. Whereas the CC-model sees knowledge as a state into which the knower puts *himself*, the CR-model sees knowledge as a state into which the knower is put by *his cognitive devices*. On the CC-model you intellectual powers are activated at will. On the CC-model your belief-forming devices fire or not independently of your direct control. According to the CC-model, whether you meet the conditions necessary and sufficient for knowledge is down to *you*. On the CR-model, it is down to your *devices*.

The two models of knowledge are an essential part of the context within which alone a proper appreciation of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy is possible. In its most general

form, an agent is guilty of an *ad verecundiam* error when two conditions are met. One is that he has accepted some proposition α that he has been told him. The other is that he has not independently confirmed his teller's *bona fides,* his authority to tell. It is easy to see that the traditional approach to the *ad verecundiam* is tailor-made for the CC-model of knowledge. In particular, it is assumed that it is in principle possible in the general case to determine the *bona fides* of one's informants and thus to assess whether the informant's testimony constitutes a reliable basis on which to construct a winning case for accepting what he has attested to. Notwithstanding its widespread and confident espousal, there is virtually nothing in the empirical record that sustains the CC-analysis of told-knowledge. This presents us with a dilemma: *Either* most of what we think we know we don't; *or* the CC-model is the wrong model of told-knowledge, hence for virtually all of what we know.

The burden of this paper is to seek relief from this dilemma in the CR-model of knowledge. If successful, we shall then have a correct analysis of the *ad verecundiam.*

2. THE CAUSAL LINK

We start by recurring to the pair of claims already touched on and adding a third and fourth.

> Proposition 1
> BEING TOLD (1): *A great deal of what we know we have been* told.

> Proposition 2
> BEING TOLD (2): *Most, by far, of what we know depends on someone's being told something.*

> Proposition 3
> THE CAUSAL TUG: *Telling someone something typically causes him to believe it.*

> Proposition 4
> ADAPTIVITY: *The link between being told something and being got to believe it is infused with adaptive significance.*

This causal tug is very strong. Bearing on this link, and reflective of it, is the so-called Reason Rule. It is not a rule, strictly speaking. It is a statement of an empirical regularity.

> Proposition 5
> THE REASON RULE: "*One party's expressed beliefs and wants are a* prima facie *reason for another party to come to have those beliefs and wants and, thereby, for those beliefs and wants to structure the range of appropriate utterances that party can contribute to the conversation. If a speaker expresses belief* X, *and the hearer neither believes nor disbelieves* X, *then the speaker's expressed belief in* X *is reason for the hearer to believe* X *and to make his or her*

contributions conform to that belief." (Jacobs and Jackson 1983, p. 57; Cf. Jackson 1996, p. 103).

A great deal of told-knowledge is passed on in conversational contexts. The reason rule reports an empirical commonplace in communities of real-life discussants. Where the rule states that a person's acceptance of a proposition is reason for a second party to accept it, it is clear that 'reason' means 'is taken as reason' by the second party. Thus a descriptively adequate theory will observe the Jacobs-Jackson regularities as a matter of empirical fact.

The reason rule describes a default. Like all defaults, it is defeasible. Like most defaults, it is a conserver of scarce resources. And like many defaults, it seems *overall* to do comparatively little cognitive or instrumental harm.

The Reason Rule has an important corollary:

Proposition 6
COROLLARY: *Human agents tend to accept without challenge the* arguments *of others except where they know or think they know or suspect that something is amiss, or when not resisting involves some non-trivial cost to themselves.*

In the first instance, you might sense the presence of a defeater. In the second, you might have been challenged by a third party. (Someone says to you, "Who is *he* to say?").

3. THE DOMINANCE OF TOLD-KNOWLEDGE

There are contexts in which it is advisable not to believe what we are told until various checkpoints have been successfully negotiated. In a criminal trial it is forbidden to convict on the say-so of the prosecutor. Or if someone tells you that your colleague is a paedophile, prudence and epistemic integrity alike require a certain caution. What is the case for the accusation? It is a fact of fundamental importance to the analysis of told-knowledge that sometimes the case for something that was told you takes the form of a case for the reliability of the teller. So these are two ways in which case-making may influence our belief that a colleague is a paedophile. You can see the documented evidence against him marshalled by the police. And you can be told it by someone whose reliability is not in doubt, someone who is in a position to know. What is particularly striking is the dominance of the latter over the former. It is a dominance that reveals itself in two ways. One is that working one's way through the massive documentation of the police's case (supposing improbably that we had access to it) would be much more time-consuming and onerous than being told by someone well-placed to do the telling. This we might say is *economic dominance.* The other is that even where the police's case is open to our inspection, most of the facts of the case are the fruit not of case-making but rather of reliable telling. Call this the *dominance of ineliminable say-so.*

Virtually without exception—apart from instances of unaided observation—non-testimonial support for a proposition embeds components that depend on testimonial support. The police case depends for the most part on what was said by witnesses and experts. And what an expert knows he knows largely on the basis of what is published by other experts, by the writers of textbooks and the authors of peer-reviewed scientific

papers. It is sometimes pleaded, especially by those in the CC-camp, that these testimonial impediment are eliminable in principle; that if we went back far enough, we could come upon all the truths of pathology, say, or of experimental psychology, without any recourse to anyone's say-so.

4. POSSIBILITY IN PRINCIPLE

Claims about what could be done "in principle" are a deep and natural harbour for confusion. They embody treacherous ambiguities. Suppose, for example, there is some language that you can't read—Aramaic, say. But you *could* read it. That is, it lies within the capacity to learn it. It may not, even so, be possible for you to learn it, what with the heavy claims that already exist on your time and on your other cognitive assets. So you can't learn Aramaic. You can't learn Aramaic in fact, but you could learn it in principle.

Suppose, on the other hand, that you can't perform the totality of data-collections and experiments which, successfully performed, would produce all of what is presently known of pathology or experimental psychology. It goes without saying that, given your other commitments, given the other claims on your cognitive resources, learning all of pathology or experimental psychology from the ground up is not on. Neither is it within your *capacity* to learn it, that is to say, your wholly unfettered capacity. It is not that you are too busy to learn it, or too tired. If you weren't busy in the slightest, if you were bristling with energy and bursting with talent—with genius, even—it still couldn't be done. You won't live long enough, you won't remember enough, you won't have computational capacity enough, and so on. Learning all of experimental psychology from the ground up exceeds your *constitutional* limitations; it is denied you by how nature has put you together as a cognitive being. So, in the sense of the Aramaic example, you couldn't learn all of experimental psychology just by yourself *even in principle*.

This hasn't stopped some theorists from observing that although,

1. You couldn't learn all of experimental psychology (EP) solo

is true, it is a contingent truth, hence one whose negation is logically possible. Accordingly

2. ◊ ~(You couldn't learn all of EP solo)

or, double negating:

3. ◊(You could learn all of EP solo).

By the standard semantics for modal sentences, it follows from (3) that

4. "You could learn all of EP solo"

is true in at least one possible world.

But there is no possible world in which (4) is true and

5. "You haven't the capacity to learn all of EP solo"

is also true. Any world in which it is true of the person who hasn't the capacity for learning EP solo is a word in which that person isn't himself, so to speak. (A Kripkean point about Trans World Heir Lines.) Accordingly,

> Proposition 7
> VACUOUS POSSIBILITIES: *In its "logical possibility" sense, the claim that in principle you could learn solo all of experimental psychology is vacuous. So in no relevant sense of "in principle" is it the case that you could in principle have achieved all of what you now know with no recourse whatever to the say-so of others.*

What are we to learn from this? We learn of the irreducibly social constitution of an individual's knowledge.[1]

5. THE *AD VERECUNDIAM*

We said that the cognitive structure of say-so would have a bearing on how *ad verecundiam* reasoning should be analyzed, especially bad *ad verecundiam* reasoning. To this end, consider

> Proposition 8
> BAD *AD VERECUNDIAM*S: *To accept a proposition on the strength of the avowal of a person without determining his* bona fides *for authoritative pronouncement is a mistake—a premise-selection mistake.*

Proposition 8 gives – nearly enough – the received view of the *ad verecundiam* fallacy. It is also widely held that

> Proposition 9
> DIRECT EVIDENCE: *Even when a say-soer's* bona fides *pass the requisite checks, the matter on which he pronounces must be open to non-say-so— or "direct"–confirmation, at least in principle.*

In the post-Hamblin era, the robustness of this assumption is remarkable. It makes an early appearance in the Woods-Walton Approach (Woods and Walton 1974; reprinted in Woods and Walton 2007; p. 19), and it crops up in Tindale's quite recent discussion (Tindale 2007, p. 136).

We are now in a position to see how thoroughly misconceived is the received opinion of these matters. Not only is the vast majority of what (we think) we know arrived at in the utter absence of confirmation of the *bona fides* of the say-so it relies on,

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[1] Starting with the acquisition of one's native language—no mother tongues without mothers. The idea that one could produce one's mother tongue solo, without the aid of mothers or anyone else, has been well-discussed, and largely discouraged, by the private language literature. See here Wittgenstein (1958) and Kripke (1982).

but the making of such a determination is in the general case not relevantly possible even in principle.

The same reservations apply to the "background check" or due diligence requirement. Here too there is no relevant sense in which it is possible to do this as a general policy. Comparatively speaking, it is hardly ever possible to do it. And beyond what's possible and not possible, it is hardly ever *sensible* to do it. This, too, has a bearing on the *ad verecundiam.* Clearly there are cases in which the say-so of another should be refused, and cases too in which due diligence should be exercised. Traditionally-minded fallacy theorists make it a blanket condition on due diligence that the

> The authority or expert (whether a person, institution, or source) must be identified and *should* have a track record that increases the reliability of the statements over related statements from sources that do not possess the expertise. Appeals to unidentified experts with unknown or weak track records *can* be judged fallacious (Tindale 2007, p. 135. Emphases added).

Other fallacy theorists write to the same effect, both before Hamblin and afterwards. For example, Salmon (1963) judges it necessary to ascertain that the "vast majority of statements made by [the source] concerning [the matter at hand] are true" (p. 64). The requirement of a reliability check as a condition of one's epistemic response to say-so is not limited to straight-up acceptance or straight-up belief. Rescher (1976) also makes it a condition on what he calls plausible reasoning, that is, reasoning to conclusions in the form $\ulcorner\alpha$ is plausible to degree $n\urcorner$, where the plausibility value of a piece of information has a principled connection to the reliability of its source.[2]

Leaving aside the flaccidity of its formulation (is "should" advisory and "can" permissive?), it is interesting to compare actual cases of the exercise of due diligence with conditions such as those laid down by Tindale. Consider a case. On its six o'clock news programme the BBC has just reported that the Ace Petroleum has drilled a significant find off the Alaska Panhandle. You reach for the phone to pass on urgent instructions to your broker, but then you pause. The BBC is an institution on whose authority you have relied for this information and for the course of action it prompts you to take. But have you established the *bona fides* of the BBC? Have you, in the spirit of Salmon, determined that the vast majority of statements made by the BBC concerning the matters it reports on are true? Have you, in the spirit of Tindale, confirmed that the BBC has a track record that increases the reliability of its statements over related statements from sources without the BBC's expertise (SkyTV, perhaps)? How would you go about doing this?

There is little point in belabouring the obvious. But there are two facts that require our notice. The first is that you wouldn't do it. The second is that even if you were to do it, the whole structure of your due diligence determinations would have the same epistemic character as the assurances you are trying to validate. For how do you know that the BBC is a reliable reporter of the news? Could the answer be that it lies in the ethos of the media's news organizations to be reliable and trustworthy? Yes; but how do you know this? Perhaps you have a producer-friend. Perhaps your friend attests to this

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[2] Rescher (1976) is a pioneering contribution to the logic of plausible reasoning, but he is as wrong as the fallacy theorists are about the across-the-board performability of reliability checks. For a critical examination of Rescher's plausibility logic, see Gabbay and Woods (2005, pp. 222-238).

ethos. Perhaps he assures you of the BBC's integrity. But do you know—and if not, could you come to know—that the vast majority of statements made by your friend about matters of interest to you are true? What is the sample on which this generalization is based? Consider here the class of the things told you which, in the absence of the telling, you could not know, now or ever. Call this knowledge *essentially-told knowledge*. Is there so much as a single essentially-told fact for which confirmation of the *bona fides* of the telling does not *itself* depend essentially on what you are told? Is there a single case in which the *bona fides* of an essential telling are confirmable in ways free of essential telling? These questions are preposterous on their face. So we will say that for large ranges of cases

> Proposition 10
> SAY-SO CHAINS: *Individual knowers operate with say-so chains.*

> Proposition 11
> INESCAPABILITY: *For individual agents, escape from say-so chains is not possible, even in principle. Say-so chains cannot be severed.*

Given the present cognitive constitution of the human individual or of any plausible evolutionary variation thereof over time, say-so-elimination is not possible in fact. Whatever its status as a vacuous logical possibility, the procedures for the elimination of say-so cannot terminate. So there is a

> Proposition 12
> A HALTING PROBLEM: *In no relevant sense of possibility is it possible for an individual's say-so-elimination procedures to halt.*

Still, the fact remains that sometimes due diligence is required and sometimes it is successfully brought off. It is plain by now that, when this is so, it is no thanks to our compliance with the naive CC-strictures of the traditionalist's account of the *ad verecundiam.* So it must be that it is to other conditions that our successful exercise of due diligence answers. The question is, what are they?

6. TRIGGERS

What would it take to answer this question? Presumably, it be an answer that told us what triggers a search. It would also tell us what closes a search. And it would tell us something of what goes on between trigger and termination. In the present section we will propose an answer to the first of these questions—the trigger question—which will have features that render the other two largely moot.

It is neither necessary nor sufficient to the triggering of a search that the telling of α fails to get you to believe α or to accept it. For example, if what an informant told you is something, α, you already knew, then his telling didn't get you to believe it, and yet he might be a fully reliable teller of α-like things, and you might know it. Equally, he might be wholly out of his depth with respect to α-like things, and you might know that too. Or you might already know that α is false. When, for this reason, a contrary telling fails to

induce the belief that α, this needn't be accompanied by the belief, or even the suspicion, that your informant lacks the *bona fides* for reliable pronouncement about things of the α-sort. No one thinks that reliable say-so is infallible. Even experts make mistakes. There is plenty of room in the present kind of case for you to think that your informant is a genuine expert who made a mistake with respect to this particular α.

There are also cases in which as a plain matter of fact an addressee will accept what a teller tells him while concurrently harbouring doubts about the teller's *bona fides.* A quite common linguistic indicator of this sort of cognitive dissonance is the addressee's seeking assurance from the very person whose *bona fides* are in doubt. ("Are you really sure that α?"; "Do you really know that α?"). This is a fact of critical importance for a correct understanding of the modern version of the *ad hominem,* a point I develop in "Lightening up on the *ad hominem*" (2007).

It is extremely difficult to get a grip on the triggering conditions for due diligence exercises. Not only is most of what we know been told us, but most of the tellers are either anonymous or persons whose track records are unknown to us. It is perfectly true that there are more or less stateable constraints on when say-so would be sought out and when a negative judgment on say-so would be arrived at. But these are not our questions here. What we are after is an understanding of the conditions under which due diligence exercises are occasioned, something that precedes both the seeking of the requisite say-so and a negative judgement of it (or any). When, lost in Amsterdam, you ask a passer-by for the whereabouts of Central Station, you are multiply-cued by contextual factors. You are also guided by an hypothesis loosely in the form "He's the sort of person who would know." "He's the sort of person who would know" is a default, a generic generalization. It decomposes into "He appears to be a local" and "Locals know the whereabouts of things like railway stations." If you are reading an article on quantum mechanics in what the British call a quality broadsheet—*The Daily Telegraph*, for example—and you come upon an error, it may strike you as an error of a kind that an expert wouldn't make. So you would judge its author's *bona fides* negatively. "This is the kind of error that an expert on X would not make" is also a default. But it gives us slack guidance at best as to the conditions under which to *initiate* an enquiry into whether this writer is an expert or not. In the present example, the default assessment is that since he committed an error of a kind an expert wouldn't make, he's no expert. So, in the absence of particular facts to the contrary, there's no occasion to ask whether or not he's an expert. That question has already been dealt with.

Checking an expert's *bona fides* is not to be confused with the quite separate matter of identifying a source as an expert. It is one thing to seek the advice of a medical expert or an income tax expert or an encyclopaedia. It is another thing to demonstrate that the expertise a source claims for itself is indeed the expertise it actually has. In the large majority of such cases, confirmation that the source is an expert is *self-attested*, a vivid example of say-so enchainment. Expert witnesses in legal proceedings announce their own expertise. In some cases, where the question of expertise is in some doubt, a judge will seek the opinion on this matter from still other experts who, in their turn, are the self attesters of it. We identify Dr. Zorn as a qualified rheumatologist on Dr. Zorn's own say-so, whether his listing in the Yellow Pages or in the Directory of the Medical Building, or on the say-so of our own general practitioner, who in turn has had it in these same ways from Dr. Zorn. If we were sceptical (or nosy), we might search Dr. Zorn's walls for duly

framed diplomas and degrees, notwithstanding that the assurances they convey are themselves the products of self-attestation. The document announces its own diplomahood. We should not be made nervous or embarrassed by our utter openness to these commonplace indications of expertise. They are not in the least self-standing instruments of reassurance, but do their work within a rich network of relevant defaults: "Medical schools don't give false assurances," "People wouldn't risk legal redress by misrepresenting themselves in this way." "The Yellow Pages wouldn't publish fraudulent information," and more generally, "People are honest, by and large." Assuredly, these things are true, and we know it. But we could not have known it in the absence of someone's having told something to someone.

Confirming a source's *bona fides* is like running a credit check on an applicant for a hire-purchase, or a title search in a real estate transaction. Perhaps closer to home is the job interview, in which, if properly conducted, a good deal of due diligence is performed. But here too the sought for assurances are themselves deeply embedded in prior say-so, albeit not exhaustively. True, a "job-talk" in a competition for a university appointment, is a display of expertise rather than a claim to it, but it is nevertheless replete with assertions offered to the audience on the basis of the lecturer's say-so. The more important point is that

> Proposition 13
> TRIGGER RARITIES: *As a matter of empirical fact the vast percentage of our actual acceptances of say-so are wholly unattended by reliability-confirmation triggers. And even if it were otherwise, the performance requirements for such enquiries would be largely beyond our ken.*

7. CONFIRMATIONAL IMPOTENCE OF CR-KNOWLEDGE

An especially poignant instance of confirmational impotence is afforded by the present conception of causal reliabilism. We say that a person knows that α if and only if α is true, she thinks she knows that α, and her thinking thus is brought about by cognitive devises working as they should on good information. The debate between the CC and CR-models of knowledge further inclines us to the view that it is not in the general case true that the conditions under which a person's cognitive devices are firing as they should are conditions that satisfy the knowledge-bestowing criteria of the CC-model. If this is right, then independent direct confirmation of the across-the-board reliability of those devices is beyond the reach of even the most perfervidly utopian epistemologist. We say with a certain, and justified, confidence that our perceptions are accurate when they are caused by perception-forming devices functioning as they should. But hardly anyone knows in anything approaching the requisite detail what those devices are, still less the conditions for their proper functioning—their final cause, so to speak. There is nothing in the least surprising about our ignorance of the mechanics of perception. It is no bar to our being good perceivers, and no bar either to our shaping our plans of action to the knowledge our perceptions give us. Reliabilism with respect to perceptual knowledge could be true (and is) notwithstanding its attendant confirmational impotence. Reliabilism with respect to knowledge more generally counsels a like lesson for knowledge across the

board. Having it depends on having cognitive devices that work properly. It does not depend on knowing the conditions thanks to which this is so.

8. WHY DO WE DO IT?

Why, then, do we persist as voracious consumers of say-so under conditions of quite general confirmational impotence? We do it because we are caused to do it. We are caused to do it by the impact of telling on our belief-forming devices. On the face of it, the link between being told and believing is not an obvious candidate for causal construal. But causal it could only be if something further thing were true: That the genericity of "Beings like us believe what we've been told" is reflected, as we said in Proposition 4, in the adaptive significance of doing so. In short, we are built for it; and being built for it secures our survival and our prosperity, and at times gives us occasion to get tickets for the Francis Bacon showing at the Tate.

Before bringing these reflections to a conclusion, it is helpful to distinguish between a strong and a weak form of defective *ad verecundiam*s.

> Proposition 14
> STRONG VERSION: *The strong form is the traditional form captured by Proposition 9, according to which an agent commits a defective* ad verecundiam *just when he accepts a source's say-so without an independent reliability check.*

> Proposition 15
> WEAK VERSION: *In its weaker form, an agent commits a defective ad verecundiam just in case he fails to take note of contextual and other features of the case at hand which call into question or occasion a challenge of the source's* bona fides.

In the strong case you commit an erroneous *ad verecundiam* when you fail to exercise due diligence. In the weak case, the error is that of not attending to factors that cut against the presumption that a reliability check is not needed. The mistake lies not in the failure to run a check, but rather in not heeding evidence to the effect that, if run, the check might well produce a negative result.

The empirical evidence tells a threefold tale about the weak version. It tells us that, by a large majority, the errors made by individual agents are errors of misinformation, not of reasoning. They are errors occasioned by the misperformance of say-so. It also tells us that beings like us make errors, lots of them. Taken together, most of our errors are the result of the breakdown of say-so. A third datum is that, in relation to the say-so error actually committed, the number occasioned by a failure to note indications of unreliability is small. This is because the majority of our misinformednesses are unattended by evidence of say-so-unreliability. From which we have it that the chief lesson to learn about the so-called *ad verecundiam* fallacy is that

Proposition 16
RARITY OF THE FALLACY: *For the most part, errors of misinformation occasioned by defective say-so are not (weak)* ad verecundiam *errors.*[3]

Link to commentary

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[3] The present paper is a condensed version of chapter 7, "Telling" of the author's *Seductions and Shortcuts: Error in the cognitive economy,* to appear.