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Commentary on John E. Fields: “Acceptable Addressee Expectations Regarding Testimony”

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Professor Fields has presented an interesting paper on a problem important in its own right and connected with other challenging themes such as the nature of stereotyping and the justifiability of racial profiling. The many questions arising here illustrate the intersection of epistemological questions with ethical and political ones.

The topic of testimony points to a significant fact about human knowledge; it can be limiting to think of knowledge in terms of knowing whether, and why, propositions are true. As has been ably argued by C.A.J. Coady, Jonathan Adler and others, to acquire knowledge of the world, we need to rely on what other people tell us. To know, we need to believe other people.

Professor Fields was kind enough to refer to my own work on the topic of social trust. My book on social trust was published in 1997 and completed several years before that. I had to consult it to find the ‘searing’ examples Fields refers to, which appear in Chapter Nine. In Chapter Three of that work, and in several published articles, I explored themes of trust and testimony and some of my conclusions were similar to those in Fields’ paper. His work reveals several places where mine needs amendment.

I suggested understanding our reliance on testimony and our trust in what others tell us in terms of three stages:

1. The innocent trust of the small child, learning language, customs, and basic facts from his or her parents;
2. The default trust of people beyond early childhood, who assume that what others tell them should be accepted as true unless there is some specific reason to reject it;
3. Reflective trust (or distrust) based on a scrutiny when there is some reason not to take testimonial claims at face value. One reflects on whether or not to accept another’s claim that P as some evidence that P is true.

We are concerned in Fields’ paper with what I called reflective trust and with the question of the transition from default trust to reflective trust. What sorts of questions should be raised at this point? What should unseat the default condition and push a person into the reflective phase? I had considered:

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- a. Is the speaker asserting some proposition P, in uttering U?
- b. Does the hearer have reasons, pertaining to the content of P, to regard P as implausible?
- c. Is the speaker honest in asserting P?
- d. Is the speaker competent with regard to knowing whether P?

Where Fields speaks of utterances, I prefer propositions; where he speaks of sincerity, I spoke of honesty. But these differences need not concern us here. His paper shows me that I neglected to consider several further aspects. These are:

- e. Does the speaker have a vested interest in asserting P?
- f. Is the speaker a member of some class such that there is a reliable reason to believe that persons in this class are unreliable with regard to such claims as P?

Now you might suppose that (e), vested interest, is an unnecessary addition, being covered by the general theme of honesty. However, Fields' example of the allegations made regarding gay and lesbian testimony about their lifestyle raises the possibility of motivated irrationality or even self-deception. One can have a kind of bias due to having psychic vested interest in believing something. One might honestly believe something in an area where, in general, one is competent, but one might be unreliable due to this bias. A person could sincerely assert (for example) that her daughter was a strong student while being self-deceived about the extent of her abilities. The possibility that a lesbian or gay person might be unreliable in testimony about his or her lifestyle (as alleged by Focus on the Family) points to this sort of problem.

But I will not pursue this matter further here. What is really of interest, of course, is the last point (f), with regard to group or class membership. I agree with Fields and with Adler that in some cases, group membership are relevant to judgments of credibility, and that questions of theory and practice here are both interesting and tricky.

Fields refers sometimes to the 'class' to which a speaker belongs and sometimes to 'group membership.' These two notions are not in all contexts equivalent. Any predicate can serve to form a class: thus we have the class of persons under six feet tall, the class of never-married redheads, and so on. But the word "group" is often used so as to imply some degree of identification, a significance of the group in structuring one's identity, and perhaps some level of organization of the group. In this sense, there is a class of never-married redheads, but there is no group of never-married redheads. Interesting questions may be posed about classes and groups. For instance, we may define a class of Chinese-Canadians, but it is disputable whether Chinese-Canadians constitute a group. The distinction is relevant to the topic at hand, I think, because to the extent that a group has cohesion and organization, its members are more likely to share relevant qualities regarding assertion-making, honesty, reliability, and vested interest.

Another pertinent matter is the voluntariness of one's membership in a class or group. In Fields' paper we see the following examples of classes or groups: ground-based observers, used car salesmen, purveyors of diet pills, gypsy fortune tellers, lesbians, gays, and Focus on the Family (an organized group). One is a ground-based observer by circumstance and in some particular context; one presumably does not choose this. But then neither is a person's lack of credibility as a ground-based observer likely to be an

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ethically significant handicap in life; thus whether someone refuses to accept his or her testimony as a ground-based observer is of little ethical or political concern. Being a used car salesman or a purveyor of diet pills is voluntary; being a fortune teller is presumably voluntary -- though being a gypsy is involuntary or semi-voluntary. Whether being lesbian or gay is voluntary is debatable and debated; being an affiliate of Focus on the Family is clearly so. I mention these points because I think that it is not only epistemically, but ethically and politically, more acceptable to consider an individual's membership as relevant to credibility when it is chosen than when it is not. You will, perhaps, get a sense of what I mean if you compare the groups mentioned in Fields' paper with classes based unchosen characteristics, such as being female or Aboriginal. Epistemically, if a person makes a choice such that a characterization applies to him or her (as in used car salesman or fortune teller) there is a greater reason to judge credibility by reference to that classification; the choice presumably reflects something about this person.

I agree with what Fields says about Elizabeth Fricker's approach, which denies a default view about accepting testimony. Fricker's strict proposal requires that hearers constantly monitor speakers for their untrustworthiness and make case-by-case decisions on their honesty and competence on the basis of such monitoring. Her view is theoretically problematic due to its denial of the default account of testimony. In her refusal to address the general problem of the acceptability of testimony, Fricker skirts a basic epistemological problem. She seems in effect to assume that there are background beliefs independent of testimony that can be applied to monitor trustworthiness. As Fields points out, her account would be operationally problematic if we were to apply it strictly. Cooperative social life would not be possible on this basis. Trying to render her account user-friendly, Fricker softens it to the point where she allows even for hearers to rely on a 'sense' of what sort of person another is, regarding competence and honesty; one can have a conviction that 'one can tell' that another person is unreliable, even when one does not know how. But then the account is operationally too soft. We are almost on the level of not believing someone on the grounds that 'I could tell there was something fishy about him.' Thus Fricker's account does not work. Theoretically, it is flawed and operationally it is either too demanding, if unamended, and not demanding enough, if amended.

Can Fields avoid the same problem? He avoids the central theoretical problem: he accepts the default view that a hearer should give some credence to a speaker's testimony unless there is good reason to do otherwise. But curiously, a key dimension is missing here. That is the issue of whether the generalization R applies to this particular individual S. This of course is a key matter, central to the whole problem. Suppose that the generalization R about the unreliability of the class of group within which the speaker is being located, is itself well-grounded and not disconfirmed by scientific investigation or personal experience in the ways Fields considers. Even assuming that this is the case, will we not be committing the fallacy of division if we apply R straightforwardly to the individual S without considering whether S might, within this group, be someone to whom the generalization R does not apply? An earlier condition in Field's account requires that the hearer be non-culpably unaware that there is a reason specific to S, to believe that S is insincere or incompetent with regard to the claim made. This condition requires the hearer attend to the speaker as an individual. Later, I believe that the hearer

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will need again to attend to the speaker as an individual, reflecting on whether there could be reason to think R does not apply to him or her. To avoid this problem on a theoretical level, we need another proviso. But if we add another proviso, the problem of demanding too much complexity for operational realism worsens.

Let me try to explain what I mean here. The question arises: can Fields avoid the operational problem? In other words, does Fields own account impose unrealistic burdens on people regarding daily interactions? (Is it user-friendly, as Fricker's unamended theoretical account is not?) This seems to me to be the key question, but I am unclear quite how to focus it. In his complex formulation, Fields proposes conditions of H having evidence to believe P on the basis of an assertion by a speaker to H, that P. The wording here makes it seem as though Fields is addressing the epistemologist's question -- when does H have such evidence? -- as distinct from attempting to give user-friendly operational advice. If he is restricting himself to theoretical epistemology, perhaps these operational questions do not arise. But if we do interpret Fields as offering an account on this operational level, there are problems. The account then seems to require both too much and too little. It allows reference to judgments about class membership as relevant to judgments of a speaker's sincerity and competence. In that sense, it can be said to be realistic, more so than Fricker's account. But the stipulated provisos here may well require too much. The judgments must be in some sense well-grounded, based on polling evidence or extensive personal experience. And it is required that the hearer have investigated his or her own generalization to determine that it is not grounded on fallacious reasoning and has not been overturned by other research or observation. While such reflections are theoretically sensible, it is not realistic to think that people could go through this much thought in day-to-day evaluation of testimony. And if we add a further proviso requiring that the hearer reflect on whether the generalization might fail to apply to this particular individual, the speaker, the problem becomes worse.

Despite the excellence of this paper, I am not convinced that this thorny problem has been solved. The need to avoid the fallacy of division pushes us back to considering the individual speaker as such, and the complexity of the provisos make the account implausible if we interpret it as intended to guide ordinary practice.

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