

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 11

May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

Objectivity, Autonomy, and the use of Arguments from Authority

John Fields
Edgewood College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Fields, John, "Objectivity, Autonomy, and the use of Arguments from Authority" (2016). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 97.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA11/papersandcommentaries/97>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Objectivity, Autonomy, and the Use of Arguments from Authority

JOHN E. FIELDS

Department of Philosophy

Edgewood College

1000 Edgewood College Dr., Madison, WI 53711

United States of America

jfields@edgewood.edu

Abstract: Starting in the early modern era, the use of arguments from authority to support important factual claims began to be heavily criticized. Recent investigations into the nature of testimony, however, suggest that such criticisms are factually and normatively problematic. In this paper, the author argues for a model of testimonial authority that corrects this earlier, unrealistically individualistic picture of how persons bear their burdens in the search for a common reality.

Keywords: authority, autonomy, epistemic modesty, expertise, objectivity, skepticism, testimony

1. Introduction

In his book *Informal Logic: A Pragmatic Approach* (2nd ed.), Douglas Walton (2012) sees the acceptability of using arguments from authority as deriving primarily from the fact that doing so is a practical necessity. As he puts it:

Good scientific evidence is based on the idea of reproducible evidence. In other words, it is better to do an experiment yourself than rely on the say-so of someone else who has done it and claimed certain results. But does that mean we should always mistrust and reject the say-so of an authority as fallacious? It need not, if our reliance on cognitive authority is only regarded as a means of supplementing experimental investigation in those cases where an immediate decision is required and independent experimental investigation is not possible or practical. (Walton, 2012, p. 212)

In that text, Walton also makes the claim that, while acceptable and even “reasonable” in the right contexts, arguments from authority are also necessarily weaker than both deductive and inductive forms of evidence when the latter are presented in an argument directly. He says:

There are good reasons for a certain mistrust of evidence obtained by appeal to authority. The strongest form of argument is the deductively valid argument. The acme of scientific knowledge is the axiomatic system, in which the only proof of a hypothesis is the deduction of that hypothesis by valid arguments from clear or well-established propositions called axioms. A weaker form of argument is inductive confirmation. A hypothesis is said to be inductively confirmed if it is based on evidence that is highly probable. Both types of evidence are objective, but the appeal to expertise fits neither of these patterns...Therefore, an argument based on the appeal to expert judgment should be rejected or discarded if deductive proof or inductive confirmation of the proposition in question can be given. (Walton, 2012, pp. 214-215)

This relative weakness, on Walton's view, is a symptom of what he describes as the "subjective" nature of arguments from authority. As he notes:

The reason that appeals to authority have been traditionally mistrusted in science as a source of argument is that such appeals are inherently subjective. The expert bases his judgment on rules of thumb and accepted methods for carrying out procedures that he and other experts have found to be useful in their practical experience of working in their special area. It may be difficult, or in some cases even impossible, for the expert to translate his practical experience or judgment into hard evidence that can be explicitly and completely described to a layperson. Since the expert's judgment is really based on his professional training, long experience, and practical know-how, his conclusion is, in an important respect, an individual and subjective judgment... (Walton, 2012, p. 214)

Indeed, according to Walton, what this means for those claims that are backed by the force of authority is that they would best be treated in many cases as providing no more than a kind of guidance or "advice" to the recipient or addressee of the argument supporting them. In his words:

Appeals to expert opinion can be a legitimate form of obtaining advice or guidance for drawing tentative conclusions on an issue or problem where objective knowledge is unavailable or inconclusive. It is well recognized in law, for example, where expert testimony is treated as an important kind of evidence in a trial... (Walton, 2012, p. 209)

In line with this, Walton (2012) uses the language of "advice" in his description and discussion of three separate examples of what he takes to be typical instances of arguments from authority (pp. 211-213).

Putting this all together, what it seems to me that Walton is saying about arguments from authority is something like the following:

- (1) Arguments from authority are certainly excusable, given certain practical considerations, but
- (2) They are in some important sense sub-optimal *vis-à-vis* other argument schemes, because
- (3) They violate a fundamental preference in favor of objectivity in argumentation, and
- (4) They violate a fundamental preference in favor of autonomy on the part of those making an argument (i.e., "it is better to do an experiment yourself than rely on the say-so of someone else who has done it and claimed certain results.")

Of course, if I've gotten this right and this is what Walton is saying, it is not as if he is the only one ever to have advanced a view of this kind. There is a long tradition of treating arguments from authority in just this way, going back to the beginning of early modern science. It is the tradition that began when early researchers, smarting under what may be described as their culture's excessive or indiscriminate use of arguments from authority, were moved to push

back strongly against the notion of epistemic authority as such and to adopt as a model of research and argumentation what has been characterized by one philosopher as the ideal of epistemic autonomy (McMyler, 2011, p. 30).

However, no matter what its antecedents, I have to say that if (1) through (4) do accurately summarize Walton's position, then I must most heartily disagree with it. For, as I see it, there is nothing about arguments from authority, looked at from a theoretical point of view, that would justify either the claim that they lack objectivity or the claim that they are a second-class form of argumentation to be utilized only in those cases where it is impractical to replace them with something more direct. Yes, some arguments from authority are bad ones. And some uses of the notion of authority in specific arguments are fallacious. But it seems to me that recent investigations into the nature and value of testimony and the character of the speech-act of telling provide evidence sufficient to suggest that arguments from authority, when considered as an argument type, are not only not sub-optimal with respect to their various argument brethren, but are the necessary concomitants of an accurate picture of how persons bear their respective burdens in the search for a common reality.

2. Origins of a prejudice

As I said, the origins of the idea that arguments from authority constitute a lesser form of argument lay in the very foundations of modern science. Indeed, one plausible way of understanding the project that Descartes was engaged in is to see him as trying to cut himself off at the outset of his investigations from all sources of intellectual authority in his society, which he deemed to be either misguided or corrupt.

Throughout this period, the development of proper method in science proceeded hand-in-hand with a disparagement of all sources of authority. This is reflected in a pithy, programmatic way by the motto of the Royal Society—founded in 1660—*Nullius in verba*, or “On the word of no man.” And such an attitude was arguably part and parcel of, and was significantly reinforced by, a much broader and profound set of social and political changes that were occurring throughout Western Europe during this time. As Tony Coady (1992) has put it:

It may be no accident that the rise of an individualist ideology coincided with the emergence of the theory of knowledge as a central philosophical concern but, accident or not, the coincidence was likely to cast into shadow the importance of our intellectual reliance upon one another and hence obstruct a serious examination of the issues this reliance raises. (p. 13)

What were some of the features of this attitude? Benjamin McMyler (2011) has outlined a couple of the more important ones, both of which can be found in the writings of John Locke. One of these is what we can call the epistemological feature. It involves a focus on the fact that reliance upon another's investigation of the world is not in line with a picture of knowledge that goes back to ancient times and that was commonly assumed by the thinkers and researchers of the early modern era (McMyler, 2011, p. 18). Within the confines of this classical conception, real knowledge or *scientia* had to involve more than simply coming to discover what was true through the medium of a reliable connection. A true knower had to have the ability to provide an accurate account of why something or other was the case and to understand that account in its entirety. It is a conception of knowledge that goes all the way back to Plato and that explains

what is for many people a puzzling feature of Plato's epistemology: his insistence that knowledge cannot be transmitted through teaching (McMyler, 2011, p. 18).

The other feature of this attitude is what we can call – for want of a better term – the moral feature. While, as McMyler points out, Locke was certainly convinced of the deficiencies of appeals to authority as a basis for scientific knowledge (McMyler, 2011, p. 24), it was in the latter's discussion of the alleged moral inadequacies of such an approach that he really hit his stride. Most of us, I think, are familiar with his discussion of the *argumentum ad verecundiam* near the end of Book Four of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. But how many of us have had the opportunity to read the following impassioned brief?

...I hope, it will not be thought arrogance, to say, That, perhaps, we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative *Knowledge*, if we sought it in the Fountain, *in the consideration of Things themselves*, and made use rather of our own Thoughts, than other Mens to find it. For, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes, as to know by other Mens Understandings. So much as we our selves consider and comprehend of Truth and Reason, so much we possess of real and true Knowledge. The floating of other Mens Opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was Science, is in us but Opiniatry, whilst we give up our Assent only to reverend Names, and do not, as they did, employ our own Reason to *understand* those *Truths*, which gave them reputation. (Locke, as cited in McMyler, 2011, p. 25)

It is true that in this passage Locke makes reference to the negative epistemological consequences of relying upon the expertise of others. He clearly believes that bringing persons into the picture introduces a significant—and unnecessary—barrier to the task of gaining objective knowledge. But there is a fervor – and, indeed, a sarcasm – just below the surface of these comments that suggests that they are also to be taken in the nature of an indictment – “we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes as to know by other men's understandings.” It seems that, from Locke's point of view, it is not enough to claim that it is a bad idea to make appeals to authority. Such appeals must be condemned in the most colorful and unconditional of terms:

In the Sciences, every one has so much, as he really knows and comprehends: What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreds; which however well in the whole piece, make no considerable addition to his stock, who gathers them. Such borrowed Wealth, like Fairy-money, though it were Gold in the land from which he received it, will be but Leaves and Dust when it comes to use. (Locke, as cited in McMyler, 2011, p. 25)

There is, in other words, in Locke's rejection of arguments from authority an accusatory flavor that makes it look as if he is doing more than simply weighing better and worse methods for understanding. He seems to be engaging in the kind of rhetorical exercise typical of one advocating adherence to a code of proper conduct. In this case, that conduct would be the conduct of a self-reliant, fully autonomous rational agent. Given Locke's role as one of the progenitors of modern liberalism, I guess his remarks in this regard should come as no surprise.

3. Sources of objectivity

When it comes to the issue of the objectivity of arguments from authority, two different sub-issues immediately arise. Let us assume that the notion of objectivity in argumentation means something (very roughly) like the following: the evidence (warrant or justification) for the conclusion lies in “the world out there” and not just in another person. In that case, what one will need to be convinced of in order to maintain that arguments from authority can be objective are two things: (1) that there is a way of thinking about knowledge (warrant or justification) that will allow one to have knowledge or to be justified in one’s beliefs without oneself having had direct access to the original source of that knowledge or justification; and (2) that there is a process by which such knowledge (warrant or justification) can be transmitted and thus indirectly accessed.

Fortunately, both of these desiderata have been addressed, and I think quite successfully, in the literature of the last several years. McMyler has done persuasive work on the first of these two sub-issues. Though, to be clear, his path was probably made easier by the fact that, for the last several decades, epistemologists have been focusing a lot of their attention on the plausibility of so-called “externalist” theories of knowledge: on the plausibility, in other words, of the idea that in order to know, one need not know that one knows.

As McMyler sees it, the sort of situation that authoritative testimony presents us with—where one supposedly knows something when one cannot oneself provide an “objective” warrant or justification for it—is a normal and perfectly acceptable component of our ordinary epistemic practices. And any theory that implies otherwise will have to account for its presence among them. In the case of arguments from authority, the acceptability of a situation of this kind is indicated by the acceptability to the various parties in that sort of situation of a certain commonly made argumentative move. This is the move whereby the responsibility for providing evidence or warrant for a claim that one has made has been deferred to another, on the assumption that the reasons that are being required in this situation—the reasons that would connect one with the objective facts of the matter—are available, but are in the possession of another.

McMyler (2011) calls this “the epistemic right of deferral” (p. 61). And he provides the following humble example of how this right of deferral works in practice:

Imagine the following scenario that is, I think, typical of our ordinary epistemic practice with respect to testimony. Alfred and Sylvia are chatting in a café, while Mary, an acquaintance of theirs, sits at a nearby table reading a book. Alfred and Sylvia begin to discuss a party that took place the previous weekend but which neither of them attended.

Alfred: George was there, and he made a real fool of himself.

Sylvia: How do you know?

Alfred: Mary told me so.

Sylvia: But I talked to George the day before the party, and he told me he would never go to such a thing.

Alfred: Don’t ask me; Mary’s the one who told me. [Turning to Mary] Mary, are you sure that George was at the party last weekend? He told Sylvia that he wasn’t going. (McMyler, 2011, p. 61)

Notice that the type of authority at question here is that which is provided by someone (somewhere along the line) having been an eyewitness to George's folly. Notice, too, that while Mary may have been that person – and thus may be the individual in possession of the “objective facts” that Alfred has pointed towards in the making of his claim – she need not be. As McMyler observes, Mary herself may at this point indicate that the reason for this belief lies with yet another person (“Max”) and will most likely be permitted to do so. In that case, it would be Max who had the experience of George and George's folly and would be the link with that experience, relayed though the chain of communication that ends with Alfred, that provides Alfred with the connection that he needs for his argument from authority to truly be about “the world out there.”

Now, I'm not saying that there aren't problems with and objections to this point of view. There always are, with any philosophical position. In particular, one might debate just how definitive appeals to practice in a case like this can be. Moreover, it is certainly the case that theorists have differing ideas on how to interpret a notion of this kind (Lackey, 2008). But the point is that there exist good reasons to suppose that one need not be locked into an idea of knowledge (justification or warrant) that presupposes, as philosophers from Plato to Locke and beyond have done, that the only way we can be said to have warrant or justification is if we are somehow able to have it in our possession ourselves. That idea is not self-evident; it is not a matter of definition; it is instead an area of contention. The fact is that our most basic epistemic practices seem to indicate that there is no problem with the idea of, as it were, borrowing evidence about the world from others and then being able to go on and use it. And a theory of expert authority that depends upon a theory of knowledge that has implications to the contrary will have to be able to account for this.

With regard to the second sub-issue, of how such borrowing works, again there has been quite a lot of discussion in the last few years—some of it right here in Windsor. Fred Kauffeld has led the way on this, with his numerous articles and presentations on the topic of the credibility of eyewitness and/or expert testimony. On Kauffeld's (2005) view, there exists a deep connection between the acts through which an individual relays testimony of this kind and the practical—one might call them the “game-theoretical”—components of the context in which those acts occur. When a source S “deliberately and openly” puts him or herself forward as someone that others can rely upon for knowledge, S does so in a context in which he or she could be shown, through close questioning or a train of subsequent events, to be either incompetent, insincere or both – resulting in a severe loss of reputation for S and, thus, in a diminution of S's ability to get others to recognize S as a reliable source in the future (Kauffeld & Fields, 2005, p. 234).

Moreover, in such a situation, S is aware that this is the context that S is in and S further understands that there are persons who will be the recipients of S's testimony who are also aware that this is the context that S is in and who are additionally aware that S is aware of the fact that they have this awareness (and so on). As a result, in presenting a token of his or her eyewitness or expert testimony, S has a set of excellent reasons, on Kauffeld's theory, for relaying it fully and accurately and those who wish to rely upon it have a set of excellent reasons for doing so. Not that it always happens in this way, of course. That's not the point. Some people do try to get away with things or don't realize that they are making mistakes. But what we are trying to come up with here is a reliable mechanism by which truths can, as it were, be moved from one person to another, not an indefeasible source of unimpeachable wisdom.

Jean Goodwin has also contributed to this conversation. In her paper “Accounting for the force of the appeal to authority”, Goodwin (2011) explicitly addresses how arguments from authority work as a type of argument scheme. She realizes that the fundamental question inherent in any such argument has to do with the arguer’s own lack of expertise regarding the issue upon which the authority in question has been invoked. This lack of expertise, which Locke and Plato would see as an insuperable obstacle to the possession of knowledge, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the arguer in such a situation to assess whether the individual in question is truly an authority or not. As Goodwin (2011) notes, how this is supposed to work is a question that goes back to ancient times (p. 5).

However, like Kauffeld, Goodwin thinks that there is a plausible and effective way out of this dilemma. And, like him, she thinks that it lies in what we might call “the incentive structure” within which the expert authority delivers her or his pronouncements. As she puts it:

There are undoubtedly many ways the purported expert can earn our trust; for example, he might offer a million dollar bond to anyone who can prove that he’s a phony...But there is one strategy that purported experts can adopt that will be available in every instance...As a purported expert, he always has at least one thing to lose: viz., his standing as an expert...Whatever the basis of his attachment to his standing as an expert, a purported expert can earn our trust in his expertise by openly taking responsibility for his statements as an expert...By doing so, he puts us in a position to be confident that his standing as an expert will be lost or at least impaired should things go wrong. This allows us to reason that he would not thus risk his standing as an expert unless he was confident that he is, in fact, an expert. (Goodwin, 2011, p. 7)

In other words, reputation, fame, honor in the eyes of others, and the potential loss thereof: these are sufficient incentives for one to do one’s best in providing one’s fellows with the truth, insofar as one is able to discern it. The motivations may be pragmatic and linked to such factitious human needs as social status and attention. But given that these needs are motivational with regard to the sharing of an individual’s arguments, reasons, and beliefs, they are of direct epistemic significance and constitute a powerful argument for and explanation of the way in which objective understanding can pass from one person to another.

4. The value of epistemic modesty

However, we still have to deal with the more general question of the overall appropriateness of using arguments from authority. For, after all, perhaps the problem here lies not so much with the issue of whether one *can* gain knowledge from the expertise of others, but whether one *ought* to. Recall that Walton permits us to rely upon arguments from authority as a matter of practical necessity. And despite his comments on the value of fairy-gold, Locke, it turns out, is willing to do the same (McMyler, 2011, p. 30). Perhaps then the issue is more one of what is normatively or prudentially acceptable than of what is epistemically possible. Or, put another way, perhaps the objection is that, unless there are some very good practical reasons for doing so, relying upon arguments from authority is inconsistent with a sincere acceptance of one’s duties as a responsible arguer. It involves a discreditable kind of epistemic dependence, a dependence that can only be excused or exonerated when it is thrust upon one by adverse circumstances.

I have to say that if this is the difficulty that arguments from authority present us with, it is by no means a difficulty that has gone undetected by many of those who daily engage in the process of informal argumentation in contemporary Western cultures. In the United States, in particular, we seem to be living through a period of increasing skepticism of the very idea of expert authority, a skepticism that is evident on both the political and cultural right and the political and cultural left. We have, for example, on the one hand, the experience of a colleague of mine, a professor of biology, who while making a presentation to a committee of the Wisconsin State Legislature on the matter of groundwater contamination, was closely questioned on her use of information from, of all things, the United States Geological Survey. “How do you know that the information they provide is accurate?” one of the legislators—a conservative Republican—asked her. “Well, how do you know that the information anybody provides is accurate?” she responded—a question that the legislator had apparently not believed he’d need to have an answer for.

But we also have the spectacle of more progressive thinkers and commentators attacking what might have seemed, until fairly recently, a pretty pedestrian notion: that individuals who have often spent their entire lives engaged in investigating a certain sort of complex phenomenon should probably be trusted more about the nature of that phenomenon than those who have not been so engaged. Jason Stanley raises these sorts of questions in his most recent volume *How Propaganda Works* (2015). And in an abstract of a paper on the problem of expertise, Steven Turner summarizes how conversations of this kind have tended to go on the academic left in the last several years:

The phenomenon of expertise produces two problems for liberal democratic theory: the first is whether it creates inequalities that undermine citizen rule or make it a sham; the second is whether the state can preserve its neutrality in liberal ‘government by discussion’ while subsidizing, depending on, and giving special status to, the opinions of experts and scientists. A standard Foucauldian critique suggests that neutrality is impossible, expert power and state power are inseparable, and that expert power is the source of the oppressive, inegalitarian effects of present regimes. Habermas argues that expert cultures make democratic discussion impossible. Analogous problems arise with ‘cognitive authority’, understood in Mertonian terms. Cognitive authority, as Merton sees it, allows us to ask about the democratic legitimacy of this authority, which appears to solve the problem (or part of the problem) because it returns ultimate ‘authority’ to the people, who reject or accept the experts’ claims. (Turner, 2001)

Despite the fact that Walton and others are very careful to distinguish between the concepts of administrative (or political) authority and epistemic authority (Walton, 2012, pp. 211-212), it is striking how quickly discussions of expert authority on both the right and the left have moved to conflate the two in the last several years. Where does this conflation—and the attendant skepticism of the value of authority—come from? I can only speculate. But it seems to me that a lot of its impetus comes from the deeply felt similarities that exist between these two types of authority. After all, despite whatever those “in the know” may think about it, expert authority is still experienced by many who are on the receiving end of it as the manifestation of a kind of power, a power that has the tendency to engender in those who have it some of the same unfortunate traits as those who have power of any kind—that is, arrogance, elitism, and a diminished capacity for empathy.

In addition, the exercise of such power—which, when it is working properly, involves requiring a belief of an individual who does not have that belief already— may be experienced by many individuals as especially demeaning. Rather than feeling validated as a thinking being, with one’s own beliefs, experiences, and ways of understanding, many individuals in a situation of this kind may instead feel that they have been unjustly commanded by the sheer power of expertise to believe something other than what has seemed obvious to them up to that point. They are required, in other words, to acquiesce to those who know more, which may be interpreted and felt by them as an insult to their personhood, or indeed, as an assault upon their freedom.

However, the fact is that there *is* a difference between the duties and powers that one may have or that one ought to have in a properly constituted democratic polity and the duties and powers that one has and that one ought to have when it comes to the search for knowledge or justified belief. In other words, what may count as a discreditable dependence on others and a lack of self-empowerment in the one case need not be counted in the same way in the other. And, indeed, it should not be counted in this way if, in the second case, we are talking about relying upon others in order to fulfill our twin epistemic duties of maximizing our set of true beliefs and minimizing our set of false ones. In that case, relying upon others who are “in the know” is not so much a matter of allowing ourselves to be oppressed or of resting upon our epistemic backsides as of fulfilling that well-known Kantian dictum that “to will the end is to will the means.”

Now, of course, this way of looking at the matter is not meant to imply that there will not be individual difficulties in individual cases with the quality of the expertise upon which one is attempting to rely. The use of arguments from authority is by no means meant to be an invitation to gullibility on either the part of the user of such an argument or on the part of the recipient. But there are various ways of dealing with problems of this kind. Pre-eminent among them is the dogged employment of certain critical questions, such as the ones provided by Walton:

Expertise question: How credible is E as an expert source?

Field question: Is E an expert in the field that A [the assertion] is in?

Opinion question: What did E assert that implies A?

Trustworthiness question: Is E personally reliable as a source?

Consistency question: Is A consistent with what other experts assert?

Backup evidence question: Is [E’s] assertion based upon evidence? (Walton, 2012, p. 218)

Putting it bluntly, it seems to me that, unless one has a very good reason for maintaining that there can be no such thing as human knowledge or justified belief—unless, that is, one has a compelling reason in favor of the thesis of universal skepticism—one cannot maintain a general skepticism about the value of expert authority. And thus one cannot maintain that there is something problematic about employing it, if it is indeed a means by which one is able to discharge effectively one’s primary epistemic responsibilities.

But I would go further. For, contrary to the views of Locke and others who have, knowingly or unknowingly, followed in his footsteps, there seems to be something deeply troubling about a model of epistemic autonomy that does not allow for a ready—perhaps even an enthusiastic—incorporation into an individual’s set of beliefs those beliefs that are based upon the experiences and expertise of others. Something, dare I say, essentially uncooperative and

perhaps even immodest seems to be going on when one looks upon one's reliance upon others as being no more than the consequence of an unfortunate practical necessity. For when, in the situation described above, a source of expertise S deliberately and openly "puts him or herself forward as someone that others can rely upon for knowledge", S risks her or his status, reputation, and, indeed, her or his dignity, in doing so. (It is, in fact, on the basis of this risk that we have good reason to believe what it is that S has said.) To refuse to acknowledge this risk and, thereby, to fail to at least heed what the person has maintained is not only imprudent (as Goodwin, 1998 puts it in a different context), it is impudent. That is, it is an insult to the individual who has made her or himself vulnerable in this way.

The late Elizabeth Anscombe was well-known for advancing a view of this kind. As she put it:

It is an insult and it may be an injury not to be believed. At least it is an insult if one is oneself made aware of the refusal, and it may be an injury if others are... Compare the irritation of a teacher at not being believed. On the whole such irritation is just – in matters where learners must learn by believing teachers. (Anscombe, 1979, pp. 150-151)

But Anscombe is not the only one who has conceptualized the matter in this way. Once we understand how testimony and arguments from authority work, it is pretty clear what is wrong with the Lockean picture of epistemic autonomy. I think Richard Moran (2006) puts it best in one of his articles on what he calls "the assurance model of testimony":

The speaker who asserts P is *not* indifferent to whether he induces belief in his audience... His assertion is asking for belief in the *very* proposition stated and for the *very* sort of reason that he is then and there presenting to him. And *that* sort of reason is bound up with his presenting himself as accountable for this truth... So we might say that, in telling the audience that P, the speaker asks that his authority be acknowledged to determine what sort of candidate reason for what belief is up for consideration. This is the spirit in which his statement is made, and it is this that is denied by treating his utterance in a wholly evidential spirit, in which the question of what is being considered a reason for what is anybody's business, and is not tethered to the speaker's awareness or intent. (p. 299)

Fortunately, despite efforts of certain early modern theorists like Locke, early modern scientists, just like the scientists of today, were never so confused about how to discharge their epistemic duties as to actually apply to the practical work in which they were engaged this sort of model of epistemic autonomy. As the eminent historian of science, Steven Shapin (1994), has noted:

This sort of individualistic rhetoric, taken by itself and at face value, would count as a massive misrepresentation of scientific practice. In fact, seventeenth-century English natural historians and natural philosophers, writing in different moods and for other purposes, showed themselves well aware that it was. Many of the same practitioners who produced some of the most vigorous individualistic methodological pronouncements also displayed keen appreciation that there was a

proper, valuable, and ineradicable role for testimony and trust within legitimate empirical practices. (p. 202)

Let us hope that we can all maintain the same level of modesty and level-headedness in our interactions with, and invocations of, those who might actually know or have experienced more.

References

- Anscombe, E. (1979). What is it to believe someone? In: C. F. Delaney (Ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.
- Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goodwin, J. (1998). Forms of authority and the real ad verecundiam. *Argumentation*, 12, 267-280.
- Goodwin, J. (2009). Accounting for the force of the appeal to authority. In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument cultures: Proceedings of the 8th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), 3-6 June 2009*, (pp. 1-9). Windsor, ON: OSSA.
- Kauffeld, F. J., & Fields J. E. (2005). The commitments speakers undertake in giving testimony. In D. Hitchcock & D. Farr (Eds.), *The Uses of Argument: Proceedings of a conference at McMaster University, 18-21 May 2005* (pp. 232-242). Windsor, ON: Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation
- Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McMyler, B. (2011). *Testimony, Trust, and Authority*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moran, R. (2006). Getting told and being believed. In: J. Lackey & E. Sosa (Eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Turner, S. (2001). What is the problem with experts? *Social Studies of Science*, 31(1), 123-149. Retrieved March 18, 2016, from <http://sss.sagepub.com/content/31/1/123.abstract>
- Shapin, S. (1994). *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Stanley, J. (2015). *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Walton, D. (2012). *Informal Logic: A Pragmatic Approach* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.