

The role of subjective certainty in the epistemology of testimony

A contextualist perspective*

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The notion of subjective certainty is currently ruled out from epistemological debate as unreliable and deceptive. In contrast, in this paper I argue that it could be relevant in the field of epistemology of testimony, where hearers must choose whether or not they trust speakers' claims. I also argue that the role of subjective certainty depends on the context. In the philosophical context, where the skeptical threat cannot be avoided, subjective certainty is not useful. On the other hand, in the ordinary context it is often reliable, especially in "innocent testimony" cases where trusting the speaker does not require evidential reasons independent from the testimony itself.

1. Subject and aim

The concept of certainty has always been a delicate issue for philosophers: some have denied the existence of any kind of certainty, while most have relegated certainties to the field of logical truths, tautologies, or self-evident propositions. Nevertheless, certainty is profoundly relevant to everyone because it is deeply rooted in our human disposition: we are endlessly in search of truth, we seek knowledge, and we are willing to defend our firm beliefs on a day-to-day basis.

Most analytical philosophers agree that there are, at least, two different kinds of certainty. On the one hand, *subjective* or psychological certainty¹ is the "highest degree of confidence" (Stanley 2008: 35) in the truth of the proposition which the subject believes. In this case, a subject *S* is certain that *p* if and only if she is "completely convinced" (Firth 1967: 5) or absolutely "confident" in the truth of *p* (Klein 1981: 128). On the other hand, according to *epistemic* or evidential certainty

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1. See Klein (1981:128): "Some philosophers have used the expression 'subjective certainty' to refer to what I am calling psychological certainty".

“one is certain of a proposition p if and only if one knows that p (or is in a position to know that p) on the basis of evidence that gives one the highest degree of justification for one’s belief that p ” (Stanley 2008: 35).² Actually defining this issue is not so easy: according to other accounts, epistemic certainty should be intended as guarantee of truth (Lewis 1946) or as the most important consequence of knowing the truth (Moore 1959). Because of its relevance to communication, this essay will focus on the former version of certainty.

Indeed the subject of this essay is the relationship between subjective certainty and propositional knowledge when communication increases mutual knowledge, that is when something is testified. The aim is to demonstrate that in the ordinary context, unlike the philosophical context where the epistemic standards are high, subjective certainty performs a crucial role in the transmission of knowledge from a speaker to a hearer (that is testimony). For this reason it is an essential condition of efficient communication.

2. Opening remarks

Consider the two following propositions: “James is certain that Pierce Brosnan is the current Premier of the Italian Republic” (which I name p); and “James is certain that Italy is in Europe” (which I name q). According to the current definition of subjective certainty, these propositions are true if and only if James is really certain, completely convinced, or absolutely confident of them. The distinguishing feature of this notion is that its attribution to the epistemic subject does not rest on the truth of the propositional content. In our cases, p is true if James has no doubt about it, even if Pierce Brosnan is not the current Premier of the Italian Republic and q is true, if James has no doubt about it, regardless of the fact that Italy is indeed a European country.

Two preliminary clarifications are in order. According to the first, it is evident that in the epistemological context the subjective certainty seems to be *prima facie* unreliable and deceptive. As Klein (1981) claims, a person

may feel certain that p on the basis of slim, inadequate, or perhaps even self-contradictory evidence. And some may feel certain with no evidence whatsoever. Still others may feel certain of anything for some alleged sceptical reasons, or merely because they are epistemically timid and never feel certain that p even though they have that epistemic right. (Klein 1981: 128)

2. The traditional distinction between *subjective* and *objective* certainty originally harks back to the Wiener Kreis and, specifically, to Carnap and Popper’s works.

In other words, certainty could appear independent from evidence. Furthermore, certainty often seems to be susceptible to psychological pressures as Pritchard (2008) recently claimed:

although we typically assert and act as if we are certain – as if, that is, there is no doubt in our mind regarding the relevant propositions – if asked whether we are certain of these propositions we are also very willing to grant that we aren't.
(Pritchard 2008: 63)

Both positions attest that the criterion of subjective certainty seems not to be fruitful in epistemology, where we aim to find necessary and strong conditions for knowledge.

Following the traditional criterion of knowledge that Plato wrote about in his *Meno* (97e–98a), epistemologists have identified three necessary conditions. Consider an epistemic subject *S*; *S* knows that *p* if and only if:

1. *p* is true (truth condition);
2. *S* believes that *p* (belief condition);
3. *S* has good epistemic reasons for believing that *p* (justification condition).

In virtue of what I have already considered, I can acknowledge that subjective certainty is not related to the *truth condition*, which is independent from the epistemic possibilities of *S* and merely determined by facts of the world.

Suppose now that a subject named James says he is certain that “Sherlock Holmes is a character created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle” (*p*). In this case, he would satisfy the *belief condition*, since we intuitively are willing to ascribe the possession of a belief to a subject who is psychologically certain of something. Some problems could arise from the possibility of distinguishing degrees in the scale of the belief. Suppose that James says: “I believe that *p*, but I’m not certain of it” or “I’m not certain that *p*, but I believe it”. Even if he satisfied the belief condition, we would not be willing to ascribe knowledge to him: his claim could be understood as an admission of (belief but) not-knowledge or of a memory lapse. Nevertheless, regardless of these problems, the traditional view of this matter holds that belief does not require subjective certainty. Furthermore, as Stanley affirms, “whatever the level of subjective certainty is in a context, it is at least as strong as the level of confidence required for full belief” (Stanley 2008: 48). Indeed Unger agrees that “being certain [...] actually requires one to believe” (Unger 1975: 86), and furthermore is the highest degree of belief.

It is still necessary to consider the *justification condition*: James’ certainty about *p* does not imply that his belief is justified, since he could have been convinced in an unreasonable way. For example, he could have run into a drunk friend or into an incorrigible liar. In both cases, James would assert a true proposition, showing

adequate belief in the truth of p , but he would not know it, since the epistemic reasons in support of his belief arose from an unreliable source of knowledge. Therefore I must conclude that, according to the traditional view in epistemology, subjective certainty only concerns the belief condition, but it does not go beyond mere belief. Nevertheless, the increasing interest in the issue of testimony may restore the value of subjective certainty in epistemology.

Having highlighted the distance between the current view and subjective certainty, I must clarify the necessary conditions of testimony-based knowledge, distinguishing between an ordinary and a philosophical context. According to *epistemic contextualism*, “the truth value of a sentence containing the knowledge predicate can vary depending on things like purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions etc., of the speakers who utter these sentences” (Cohen 1999: 57). Because of the variation of epistemic standards in different contexts, “one speaker may say «S knows p », and another say «S does not know p », (relative to the same circumstances), and both speakers thereby say something true” (Cohen 2000: 94). This contextualist perspective may be the key to understanding the role of subjective certainty, because this view seems to be very similar to our everyday experience where epistemic standards often fluctuate.

Within this contextualist view, this essay considers the philosophical and the ordinary context: in the former, epistemic standards must be necessarily high, because we deal with the skeptical hypothesis, which tends to doubt every supposed knowledge. In the latter, the attributions of knowledge can proceed from “relaxed” epistemic standards. If we were to hold to the skeptical hypothesis in the ordinary life (especially the global version), we could not, for example, take the train expecting it will arrive at the station nor trust the conductor about our stop or, worse still, we could not have our dinner since the food could be poisoned. In other words, our life would be absurdly paralyzed. Any epistemological thesis must be able to defend itself against the skeptical threat, unless it merely postulates that we are *a priori* safe from it. As it will become clear in the following section, a contextualist approach on the one hand answers to skepticism, acknowledging its consistency, but relegating it to a particular context. On the other hand it allows me to apply remarks to an “everyday scenario”, which considers psychological, sociological, cultural and environmental features that condition the epistemic access of subjects to knowledge.

3. Argument

In order to demonstrate my thesis, that in the ordinary context, unlike the philosophical context, subjective certainty performs a crucial role in testimony, I must

check the conditions of testimony-based knowledge. Since I will have to deal with two different approaches, a Reidian one and a Humean one, I shall begin with an ordinary example of testimony following the former approach before moving to the Humean alternative to discuss its advantages and problems.

Suppose now that James is studying in a library with his friend Mary, who stands up and starts talking with another woman. Then suppose that, when Mary returns to her desk, James asks her the name of her acquaintance and that she answers *p*: “Her name is Kate”. Which conditions allow us to claim that James knows that *p*? Most epistemologists of testimony agree that “for every speaker *S* and hearer *H*, if *H* comes to know that *p* via *S*’s testifying that *p*, then *S* must know that *p*” (Lackey 1999: 473).³ In my case I suppose that Mary knows that *p*, satisfying the three conditions of knowledge I have already described. Kate is the real name of the girl, Mary believes that her name is Kate, and Mary has good epistemic reasons in support of her belief: for example, they could be classmates, or Mary could know Kate’s family. Furthermore, suppose that James has been acquainted with Mary for a long time and knows her to be trustworthy. In this case, she shows her own subjective certainty using the simple indicative in the answer, with a forceful and self-confident pitch and without any epistemic marker of uncertainty or doubt. Thus, supposing Mary’s knowledge that *p*, as I have already said, my interest focuses on the conditions that allow us to claim that James, the hearer in the example, knows that *p*. Therefore, I must verify whether he does satisfy them by comparing what happens in each context.

Let us replace the epistemic subject *S* with James in the traditional analysis of knowledge and consider it again. The fulfillment of the truth condition is independent of the epistemic subjects: if the name of the alleged “Kate” actually were “Eleanor”, I could not ascribe knowledge either to James or to Mary, in either the philosophical or the ordinary context. But in the philosophical context James should verify the truthfulness of Mary’s testimony, perhaps by asking Kate her name or for proof of identity. However, that could be insufficient, since the skeptic could still reply that the documents are fake or that the girl is involved in an FBI protection program. Obviously this would look odd in the ordinary context, where we usually follow the Reidian *principle of veracity* and the Gricean conversational maxims. According to the first, we have

a propensity to speak truth, and to use the signs of language so as to convey our real sentiments. This principle has a powerful operation, even in the greatest liars; for where they lie once, they speak truth a hundred times. Truth is always

3. I overlook the current debate about the necessity of this requirement. For further clarifications see, for example, Fricker (2006), Goldberg (2001), Lackey (1999), Reynolds (2002).

uppermost, and is the natural issue of the mind. It requires no art or training, no inducement or temptation, but only that we yield to a natural impulse. [...] Speaking truth is like using our natural food, which we would do from appetite.
(Reid [1764] 1997: B 193)⁴

Therefore, according to Reid, a speaker is naturally inclined to speak truthfully. Even Hume, who is the main opponent of the Reidian view, agrees with the Scottish philosopher, when he writes:

had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity; were they not sensible to shame when detected in a falsehood. Were not these [...] discovered by *experience* to be qualities, inherent in human nature, we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony. (Hume [1748] 1964: 90)

Even though these philosophers ultimately disagree about the conditions for trusting a speaker as we will explain later, they share a common principle about the necessity of assuming her inclination to truth.

What is for Reid a natural propensity, is for Grice a requirement for effective conversation. The Gricean *maxim of Quality* requires that you as a speaker must “try to make your contribution one that is true” and “not say what you believe false or unjustified” (Grice 1975: 46). Without the speaker’s commitment to truth, communication would be impossible because the hearer would need to check every testimonial belief and achieving knowledge would require an unreasonable effort.

Now that we have clarified the condition for stating that *p* is true, we can analyse the second condition of the traditional criterion of knowledge concerning the subject’s belief. This condition must be satisfied by both Mary and James: on the one hand if Mary does not believe that her friend’s name is “Kate”, her claim would be a lie. A liar is defined as one who does not believe the truth of her own statement, not simply one who makes a false statement, since honest mistakes are not lies (see Vassallo 2011: Chapter 17). On the other hand if James does not believe her testimony, *p* could be true and justified, but he would not know it. For instance, if he absurdly says, “I know that the friend of Mary is Kate, but I do not believe it”, we would not be willing to ascribe knowledge to him. Thus, both participants must satisfy the belief condition.

4. The question about the correct interpretation of the Reidian words has raised an interesting debate: according to some philosophers, the *principle of veracity* claims that if a subject *S* says *p*, *S* believes *p*; according to others, it claims that if *S* says *p*, *p* is true and *S* believes that *p*. In this work, I suppose that the best interpretation is the second one, considering that everybody testifies more true beliefs than false ones. For further clarifications, see Wolterstorff (2001: Chapter VII) and Van Cleve (2006).

For the hearer, the satisfaction of this condition demands special consideration in both the ordinary and the philosophical contexts. In the former, James can satisfy the belief condition by following the Reidian *principle of credulity*, according to which we are naturally inclined “to confide in the veracity of others and to believe what they tell us” (Reid [1764] 1997: B 194). Although this approach clearly leaves open the possibility of being deceived by liars, it is the *conditio sine qua non* for allowing children to acquire knowledge, especially when they are too young to evaluate whether their beliefs are epistemically justified. As Reid claims,

I believed by instinct whatever they [my parents and tutors] told me, long before I had the idea of a lie. [...] Afterwards, upon reflection, [...] I found that, if I had not believed what they told me, before I could give a reason for my belief, I had to this day been little better than a changeling. (Reid [1764] 1997: B 170)

The validity of this principle is relevant not only in developmental years,⁵ but remains a lifelong cornerstone to human understanding, since

in the matter of testimony, the balance of human judgment is by nature inclined to the side of belief [...]. If it was not so, no proposition that is uttered in discourse would be believed, until it was examined and tried by reason; and most men would be unable to find reasons for believing the thousandth part of what is told them. (Reid [1764] 1997: B 194)

Therefore, moving back to my ordinary case, even if James were deceived by Mary, he could trust her, grounding his belief on Reidian credulity and on her display of the necessary degree of subjective certainty. In other words, if he has the natural disposition to trust the testimony of Mary, *a fortiori* he will trust her, based on her great confidence in the answer.

In contrast, in the philosophical context, the skeptic could doubt not only the truth of the testimony, but also the witness’ belief in the truth of her claim. Since she could be a liar, James can neither count on her expression of subjective certainty nor follow the principle of credulity with its dangerous gullibility.

Someone could object that the above discussion of the Reidian *principle of credulity* deals more with the justification condition than with the belief condition, and this is a fair point. In fact, the belief condition could be trivially satisfied if and only if the hearer is willing to believe what the speaker testifies. The following discussion utilizes the traditional notions of belief and justification as different

5. Clearly Reid does not deny that in adulthood credulity needs to be supported by other sources of knowledge and by experience. As Plantinga noted, “credulity is modified by experience; we learn to believe some people under some circumstances and to disbelieve others under others.” (1993: 33)

conditions of knowledge in order to clarify the relationship between subjective certainty and each condition. Nevertheless such a separation of belief and justification is useful to specify the requirements for defining knowledge, although in our natural conversational contexts the expression of subjective certainty by the speaker seems to constitute a good reason for justifying some sorts of testimonial beliefs.

Thus let us investigate the justification condition as separate from belief. In doing so, I can distinguish two possible criteria: *non-reductionism* and *reductionism* (Vassallo 2011; Lackey 2006). According to non-reductionists, who follow the Reidian view, the hearer is justified in believing that the claim of the speaker (p) is true if there are no defeaters of p nor doubts about the reliability of the speaker. According to this view, testimony constitutes a primary or basic source of justification⁶ in the way that memory, perception and inference are.⁷ Therefore, in my example James would be justified in believing that Mary was speaking with Kate if he had no reasons for believing that Mary's belief is unjustified and that she is an unreliable witness. Following Stevenson's definitions of testimony, I will name this criterion "innocent testimony", since it is *per se* trustworthy (Stevenson 1993: 436).

On the contrary, according to reductionists, who accept the Humean view, the hearer is justified in believing that p if and only if he does possess good reasons for believing it and for trusting the speaker.⁸ The absence of evident defeaters is a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. According to this perspective, the reasons which the hearer needs will not be testimony-based, but grounded on the primary sources that I have already cited, since testimony is only a secondary source of justification. I will name this view "guilty testimony", since it is not *per se* worthy of belief (Stevenson 1993: 436).

In order to evaluate which criterion I should adopt in my example, I must distinguish again between the two contexts: in the philosophical one James undoubtedly has to respect the latter criterion, since he needs good epistemic reasons in order to trust the testimony of his friend. In this case, he could think, for instance,

6. Many clarifications about the distinction between sources of knowledge and sources of justification would be necessary, but in this essay I cannot analyze this relevant topic. For a clear and detailed description of it, refer to Audi (1997). In the following pages I will not make theoretical distinction between these kinds of sources and I will treat testimony both as a source of knowledge and as a source of justification.

7. For further versions of non-reductionism see for example Audi (1997); Austin (1999); Coady (1992); Goldman (1999); Hardwig (1991).

8. For further versions of reductionism see for example Adler (1994); Fricker (1994, 2006); Van Cleve (2006).

that Kate is a relative, a friend, or Mary's schoolmate; or that Mary has seen Kate checking out books from the library many times. He should also believe that Mary's brain works properly, and finally that she perfectly understands his language. As I have done for the first condition, even in this case I must defend the possibility of knowledge from the skeptic threat. Therefore, it is necessary that any case of testimony-based belief in the philosophical context be justified through a strong criterion, like the one of *guilty testimony*.

Even with the Humean criterion, some skeptic could reply that the *guilty testimony* condition, although necessary, could never be sufficient in that context. Indeed, the skeptic could find a possible defeater to every good reason James had, leading the discussion to a dead end. Probably I should admit this eventuality, but this would not have productive outcomes, since I would be claiming that in this context there is no possibility of testimony-based knowledge. In other words, I would be falling into the Cartesian solipsistic perspective, where the subject "repudiates all reliance on testimony of others and resolves to accept only what he can justify with his own unaided mental resources" (Stevenson 1993; 431). Ultimately the skeptical perspective would commit us to renounce any communication of knowledge among philosophers.

In contrast, if someone was supposing that I am overstating the risks in the philosophical context, my argument would still stand. Indeed my goal is to underline the gap between this context and the ordinary one, where *innocent testimony* often is not only a necessary condition, but also sufficient to justify our beliefs. From childhood to adulthood, most of our epistemic background comes from testimony: parents and relatives first of all, then teachers, peers, schoolbooks, newspapers, and websites, and eventually unknown people communicate their beliefs and knowledge to us. Growing up, we learn to demand reasons for beliefs they communicate, when it is necessary, but often the justification for a testimony-based belief can rest on two kinds of requirements: the negative one, which is the absence of reasons against received testimony (or defeaters) and the positive one, which is the expression and the communication of subjective certainty by the witness. If I were overstating the risks in the philosophical context, the necessity of testimony in the ordinary one is not debatable.

Let us now apply the negative and the positive requirements to my example. James's belief regarding the name of Mary's friend can satisfy the first requirement of the testimonial justification condition, only if he does not have any evidence against his belief that is if it fulfills the non-reductionist criterion of *innocent testimony*. In other words, James' belief is "negatively" justified if he does not possess reasons to doubt both the truth of the belief (that the name of Mary's friend is Kate) and the witness' reliability under optimal epistemic conditions (that Mary is an honest and reliable girl, that her perceptual and intellectual faculties are working

adequately, and that she has never deceived him). On the other side, the positive requirement usually can be satisfied by the ingredients of the standard syntax of the testimony which I have mentioned before: simple present in the answer, forceful and self-confident pitch, and absence of any epistemic marker of uncertainty, such as “I believe that”, “I suppose that”, “It seems to me that”, “I’m almost certain that”, “Probably...”, “In my opinion...”, “Maybe...” etc. Thus, focusing on the ordinary context of my example I can clarify the importance of the negative and the positive requirements and also appreciate the role that subjective certainty plays in the testimonial justification condition.

This paves the way to two possible and related objections to my requirements of justification for *innocent testimony*: according to the first, someone could reply that requiring the positive condition of testimonial justification (the communication of subjective certainty) is already committed to the criterion of *guilty testimony* (reductionist). In order to answer this, consider another example, following in part Vassallo (2006): suppose that Annie and Bruce go to Rome for the first time and that they want to visit the Sistine Chapel. Once in Rome, Bruce tells Annie, showing himself to be certain of their position in the city, “The Sistine Chapel is on the right. Let’s go!”. An unknown Roman girl, who overhears the conversation, showing herself to be as certain as Bruce, helpfully intervenes: “You’re right! The Sistine Chapel is in the Vatican Museum, on the right”. Annie could trust both witnesses, but not on the same grounds: she will trust the unknown Roman following the criterion of *innocent testimony*, comforted by her certainty, naturally assuming that she knows the city very well. On the other side, she could trust Bruce, if he is looking at a map of Rome or checking it on his smartphone. In this case she is following the criterion of *guilty testimony* and his subjective certainty is not a sufficient reason to trust him.

Therefore, I can reply to the objection in two ways: according to the first, subjective certainty becomes a necessary condition in the non-reductionist (*innocent testimony*) perspective, just as the absence of it compels me to adopt the reductionist criterion (*guilty testimony*). For subjective certainty cannot be a sufficient reason for trusting someone’s testimony in the reductionist perspective. Secondly, I can notice that “contexts are able to determine which is the most opportune analysis” (Vassallo 2006; 133) of testimony-based justification, since some contextual details allow me to distinguish the most apt criterion for each situation, just as in Annie’s case. Because the communication of subjective certainty is inextricably linked to the testimony itself, it is consistently suitable for the requirements of the *innocent testimony*, rather than being committed to the requirements of *guilty testimony*.

These remarks lead to the second possible objection against my requirements of justification, which concerns the complicated issue of distinguishing degrees of subjective certainty. Indeed someone could claim that any expression

of uncertainty by the speaker could be a sufficient defeater of the hearer's belief. In this case the positive requirement becomes as inapplicable to the non-reductionist perspective as it is to the reductionist one, in both cases because a witness' communication of uncertainty would commit the hearer to verify the content of her testimony before trusting her.

On the one hand I could assume that the absence of a clear expression of uncertainty is already a communication of certainty; on the other hand I could suppose that someone could make a claim without any commitment to communicate certainty or uncertainty. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, I am inclined to believe that an epistemically careful hearer would look for a sign of certainty in the speaker's words, expressions, pitches, or gestures. Otherwise it would be difficult for her to trust the witness, without any good epistemic reason for believing the claim. Thus, while in the future it would be valuable to defend this choice, for now it seems most consistent with my perspective to require a positive expression of subjective certainty by the speaker.

In virtue of my argument that subjective certainty is more essential to the *innocent testimony* criterion than to the *guilty testimony* one, consider what effects this perspective could have on the third condition of knowledge starting from the ordinary-context case. Suppose that a female-speaker (*S*) tells the truth to a male-hearer (*H*) with an adequate degree of certainty. In this case, *H* knows that *p* if and only if:

1. *p* is true (truth condition);
2. *H* trusts *S* by virtue of the *principle of credulity* and his belief is supported by the certainty she shows (belief condition);
3. *S*'s expression of subjective certainty allows *H* to be justified in believing that *p* according to the Reidian criterion of *innocent testimony* if he has no particular reasons to doubt *S*'s testimony and her reliability as a witness (justification condition).

From these requirements, it follows that in my example from ordinary life, James can know that Mary's friend is Kate. The main thrust of my argument in the ordinary context is that subjective certainty gives as much support to the fulfillment of the belief condition as to that of the justification. In other words I maintain that, when the speaker shows herself certain about what she is saying, there are by far more possibilities for the hearer to be justified in trusting her testimony without any particular non-testimonial evidence. Therefore, if the speaker appropriately expresses her subjective certainty, the hearer is able to appeal to the *principle of veracity*, to the *principle of credulity*, and to the criterion of *innocent testimony*.

The danger that this argument raises is that we may find ourselves trusting liars when the speaker appears to be certain, since we reduce the level of the justification-requirements and accept the Reidian criterion, rather than the reductionist one of *guilty testimony*. Despite this danger, it would be even more hazardous to renounce any attribution of knowledge through *innocent testimony* since everybody needs to acquire knowledge by unknown but reliable witnesses. On a daily basis we trust reporters, doctors, butchers, fruit sellers, coaches, and postal carriers without verifying their credentials. Oftentimes, according to the Humean criterion, we can have epistemic reasons for trusting them, such as the witness' expertise and the authority which arises from her social position (e.g. usually we trust the unknown lecturer who marks our test, if she does not give reason to think that she is drunk or a liar). But in reality we do not have them in every circumstance. Furthermore, although we may have these reasons in our epistemic background, we do not always make use of them. We aim at knowledge, and sometimes we must be willing to take the risk of being deceived or misguided if we need to acquire new information.

Suppose now that the speaker (*S*) is telling the truth but that she does not communicate any particular certainty to the hearer (*H*). In this case, the scenario would be different and *H* would know that *p* if and only if:

1. (similarly) *p* is true (truth condition);
2. *H* can trust her by virtue of the *principle of credulity*, as long as *S* is not showing any expression of doubt about *p* (belief condition);⁹
3. *H* is justified in believing that *p* following the Humean criterion of *guilty testimony* only if he possesses independent reasons for believing that *p*, whether or not *S* expresses uncertainty (justification condition).

Without the adequate expression of subjective certainty, the Humean criterion of *guilty testimony* is the only possible requirement of justification.

This distinction between scenarios with or without subjective certainty becomes irrelevant in the philosophical context, where this notion can contribute only to the belief condition. As in the previous case, *S* must embrace the reductionist *guilty testimony* and cannot consider subjective certainty to be a reason *pro* justification of the witness. Subjective certainty is not truth-conducive *per se* in that the speaker could communicate it both when *p* is true and when *p* is false,

9. In front of that expression by the witness, *S* could keep on believing that the witness believes that *p* but that she could not possess the adequate reasons for her belief. Obviously, it would have consequences for *S* on the justification condition, but it would not undermine the belief condition, since *S* could believe that *p* because of a doubtful testimony.

and both when she believes that p and when she does not believe that p . Thus, it becomes irrelevant in the philosophical context where the most important purpose for epistemologists is to avoid acquiring false beliefs and to save the possibility of achieving knowledge against the skeptic threat. Because this particular purpose cannot allow for the possibility of acquiring false beliefs, the criterion of *guilty testimony* becomes the only available standard of justification. In contrast, in the ordinary context, where we must concede some false beliefs, our goal is to support the possibility of acquiring and communicating knowledge through testimony, which is a vital source of knowledge. Therefore in that context subjective certainty becomes crucial.

In conclusion, though the role of subjective certainty is suspicious in the philosophical context, it is undoubtedly valuable to the field of the epistemology of testimony, especially in those ordinary cases of *innocent testimony* where the hearer can trust the speaker without a particular effort to find independent epistemic reasons for belief. Limiting the primary function of subjective certainty to cases of *innocent testimony* could sound too narrow, but this is better than the current practice of ruling it out from any epistemological debate. This opens up further fields of inquiry, such as that of distinguishing degrees of certainty and evaluating our unconscious level of confidence in others. These fascinating issues that cross the boundary between philosophy and psychology call for future exploration.

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