

The Epistemology of Testimony Locke and His Critics*

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Kant famously summed up Enlightenment in the injunction: ‘Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding!’ (Kant [1784] 1996: 17). Under the influence of this ideology, much of modern epistemology (beginning well before Kant) has focused on the individual knower, and treated the search for knowledge as a lonely task—one that might, indeed, begin from a position of doubt about whether other minds, who might join the task of inquiry, exist at all.

Recently, however, analytic epistemologists have become much more interested in social epistemology, and particularly the epistemology of testimony. Testimony, in the philosophers’ broad sense of the word, occurs whenever some person makes an assertion with the intention that the audience should accept it on her say-so (McMyler 2011: 54–59; Zagzebski 2012: 121). This contrasts, for instance, with the case of a math teacher who wants the student to accept the theorem on the basis of the proof, and not merely on her say-so. When the audience does in fact accept the assertion, the audience trusts the speaker. A speaker who ought to be trusted in this way (on a particular topic, in a particular context) is said to possess epistemic authority (or to be an authority on the subject).

C. A. J. Coady (1992), whose work played an important role in launching the discussion of testimony in recent analytic philosophy, framed his discussion in terms of a dispute between Hume and Reid. Hume, Coady correctly notes (Coady 1992: ch. 4), adopted a reductive theory of testimony, holding that our use of testimony could be accounted for entirely by general principles of epistemology. In particular, Hume held a version of what has come to be known as the evidential model of testimony (see McMyler 2011: §3.1). According to this view, the fact that a speaker makes certain sounds (or certain marks on paper) is simply an ordinary piece of empirical evidence from which we might try to infer something about what the world is like, based on our beliefs and assumptions about how and why the speaker is making those sounds (or marks). This kind of theory is now defended, for instance, by Elizabeth Fricker (2006). Reid, by contrast, held that trust in testimony was an independent ‘first principle’ of the

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human constitution (see Coady 1992: ch. 7; McMyler 2011: §1.4). On a non-reductive view like Reid's, testimony plays by its own epistemic rules, as it were, and can't be treated the same as ordinary empirical evidence. Non-reductive views are defended, for instance, by Coady, Benjamin McMyler (2011), and Linda Zagzebski (2012).¹

Although the disagreement between Hume and Reid is often acknowledged as a predecessor to the contemporary debate, it is often assumed (tacitly or explicitly) that early modern philosophers prior to Reid simply took the evidential model for granted.² In fact, although the evidential model was quite popular, its proponents, by and large, did not simply take it for granted, but offered defences of it. Indeed, they had to do so because the model came under frequent attack.

The neglect of these debates may be partly because most opponents of the evidential model have not been recognised as part of the philosophical 'canon'. It may also be partly because many of their arguments occur in a specifically religious context, defending the (supposed) expert testimony of the clergy in matters theological. However, these debates have particular relevance today because the clergy of that time were government-endorsed experts on matters thought to be crucial to individual and national well-being. In this respect, their position is structurally similar to that of public health officials or scientists in environmental protection agencies today. The question of the criteria we ought to use to decide whether and how far to trust such purported experts is a question of enormous practical importance today.

This chapter will examine the epistemology of testimony in Locke and three of his early critics. In §1, I will outline Locke's version of the evidential model and his reasons for endorsing it. Then, I will proceed to discuss the modification of Locke's evidential model by Leibniz (§2) and its total rejection by Mary Astell (§3) and Peter Browne (§4).

1 Locke and the Evidential Model of Testimony

Zagzebski correctly takes Locke as a paradigm of what she calls 'epistemic egoism' (Zagzebski 2012: 14–16, 182–183). It is a central principle of Locke's

1. The reductive/non-reductive contrast is sometimes defined in terms of whether testimony is innocent until proven guilty or guilty until proven innocent (Leonard 2021: §1). This, however, is derivative of the more fundamental issue of whether the epistemic norms governing testimony can be reduced to other more general epistemic norms (Coady 1992: 22–23; McMyler 2011: 47–49). Hence the name.

2. According to Coady, modern epistemology exhibits a 'tradition of neglect' of testimony and 'Hume . . . is one of the few philosophers to discuss the topic seriously' (Coady 1992: 6–7), while 'Reid is the only philosopher, so far as [Coady] know[s] to adopt the view that testimony is a fundamental source of epistemic justification, similar to perception or memory (Coady 1992: 23). McMyler, on the other hand, says that the evidential model was new in the early Enlightenment (McMyler 2011: 6), part and parcel of a more general suspicious attitude toward authority. As we will see, McMyler's portrayal is much closer to the historical reality than Coady's. The evidential model was controversial, and it was controversial in part because of its association with a broader individualist ideology that had significant implications for politics, religion, and so on.

epistemology that ‘we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes, as to know by other Mens Understandings’ (EHU: §1.4.12; cf. Locke [1706] 1823: §24). It might be thought (and sometimes has been thought) that this precludes Locke from having an epistemology of testimony. This, however, is a mistake.

Locke’s epistemology recognises two basic states, knowledge (also called ‘certainty’ or ‘certitude’) and judgement (also called ‘belief’ or ‘opinion’). In Locke’s usage (and that of most early modern philosophers), judgement (belief) is not an ingredient in knowledge and what one judges (believes) one, by definition, does not know. Knowledge is ‘*the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*’ (EHU: §4.1.2), while judgement ‘is the putting *Ideas* together, or separating them from one another . . . when their certain Agreement or Disagreement is not perceived, but *presumed* to be so’ (EHU: §4.14.4). Truth, according to Locke, is ‘*the joining of Signs, as the Things signified by them, do agree or disagree one with another*. The *joining* or *separating* of signs here meant is what . . . we call Proposition’ (EHU: §4.5.2). When we join ideas because we perceive that they belong together (and so perceive that the resulting proposition is true), we have knowledge. When we join ideas without perceiving this (instead merely ‘presuming’ it), we have judgement.³

This gives rise to two general questions. First, how can we obtain knowledge? Second, how should we regulate judgement? These are the central questions of Locke’s *Essay*, and particularly of the climactic Book IV. We here pass over the details of Locke’s theory of knowledge, to focus on his account of the proper regulation of judgement, since it is here that Locke discusses testimony.⁴

According to Locke, those propositions we judge are rendered probable for us in one or both of two ways: by ‘our own Knowledge, Observation, and Experience’ or by ‘The Testimony of others’ (EHU: §4.16.4).⁵ The testimony of others cannot, on Locke’s view, make us perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas, and therefore it cannot contribute to knowledge. However, it should not therefore be thought that Locke devalues testimony or underestimates how essential it is to our epistemic lives (Shieber 2009; McNulty 2013). Indeed, Locke repeatedly disclaims any such intention (for example, EHU: §§1.4.23, 4.16.11). One of the central themes of Locke’s epistemology is that, because the scope of human knowledge is ‘very short and scanty’ (EHU: §4.14.1), ‘God has given Man [the faculty of judgement] to supply the want of clear and certain Knowledge where that cannot be had’ (EHU: §4.14.3). The wise use of judgement is crucial to our practical lives (EHU: §1.1.5). Testimony is one of two sources of probability, and probability is what ought to regulate judgement (EHU: §4.16.1). Thus, despite its inability to confer knowledge, testimony in fact plays a central role in Locke’s epistemology (Boespflug 2019).

Testimony is, then, quite important for Locke and he discusses it at some length. However, it is important to note how Locke discusses it: as a central, paradigm example of empirical evidence that may render a proposition probable. It is

3. On propositions as joinings of ideas, and the implications this has for the theory of judgement and truth, see Marušić 2014.

4. For an overview of Locke’s theory of knowledge, see Newman 2007a.

5. For an overview of Locke’s account of judgement, see Owen 2007.

seen as being of the same kind, and to be weighed in the same balance with, our own empirical observations (EHU: §§4.15.5–6, 4.16.6–8). Further, although this is not always fully explicit, the principles used in the evaluation of testimony, to see how much ‘weight’ it should be given, appear to be based on empirical generalisations about human trustworthiness (see, for example, EHU: §4.15.1). Finally, in ‘The Conduct of the Understanding,’ Locke explicitly rejects the view that ‘by reading, the author’s knowledge is transfused into the reader’s understanding,’ holding instead that knowledge can be gained by reading only when reading helps us see the agreement of ideas for ourselves. He goes on to conclude that ‘second-hand ... knowledge ... is no knowledge at all’ (Locke [1706] 1823: §24). This amounts to a reductivist evidential model of testimony (cf. McMyler 2011: 24–31). In Locke’s view, testimony is ordinary empirical evidence, capable of adding its weight to the probability of a proposition.

The evidential model is not, for Locke, an unquestioned assumption. It rests primarily on a general theory about the nature of knowledge and (reasonable) belief. When I know or believe something, I join or separate two ideas because I take there to be an agreement or disagreement between them. I, and I alone, am responsible for joining or separating ideas rightly, and cannot defer to another in this task, else it would not be my belief. This is what Locke means when he says ‘we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes, as to know by other Mens Understandings’ (EHU: §1.4.12): I may well believe that Noah saw the Deluge, but this is not at all the same thing as seeing it for myself (EHU: §4.18.4). In the same way, believing that someone else knows a certain proposition may provide me with adequate reason to judge that proposition to be true, but this is not at all the same as knowing the proposition for myself.

2 Leibniz on Presumption and Expert Testimony

While Locke recognises the importance of testimony to our cognitive life, he limits our reliance on testimony to ‘matters of fact’ which the testifier purports to have personally witnessed (EHU: §4.16.12). According to Locke,

if the Opinions and Perswasions of others, whom we know and think well of, be a ground of Assent, Men have Reason to be Heathens in *Japan*, Mahumetans in *Turkey*, Papists in *Spain*, Protestants in *England*, and Lutherans in *Sweden*. (EHU: §4.15.6)

Locke clearly takes this consequence to be absurd. Leibniz, however, is prepared to accept it. The reason we must accept this conclusion, according to Leibniz, is that we must rely on expert testimony, and not only the testimony of eyewitnesses:

judges show great deference to the views and opinions of expert people in every field; private individuals are no less obliged to do the same, in so far as the matter is not one for them to investigate for themselves. So a child, or an inexperienced adult ... is obliged ... to

follow the religion of his country so long as he sees nothing wrong with it and is not in a position to inquire into whether there is a better one. (NE: §4.15.6)

The appropriate kind of deference in these cases, Leibniz says, is presumption.

In his official definition of ‘judgement’, Locke had spoken of presuming an agreement or disagreement between ideas (EHU: §4.14.4). However, he gave no account of presumption. Leibniz, on the other hand, discusses presumption rather extensively. ‘Presumption’ (Fr. ‘présomption’⁶) is, for Leibniz, explicitly a legal term.⁷ It is defined as ‘what should pass for true until there is a proof of the contrary’ (NE: ch. 4.14, translation modified; cf. §4.16.5; T: Preliminary Dissertation §33). As Robert Adams (1994: 194) points out, the epistemic significance of this notion is in some doubt since the legal rules of presumption do not appear to regulate belief. The familiar rule of the presumption of innocence, for instance, says that the accused should be legally treated as innocent until the contrary is proved. It is in this way that the proposition that the accused is innocent should ‘pass for true’: that is, we should act as if it is true. It does not seem that the rule requires us to believe this proposition or, indeed, that our beliefs matter at all in this context.

Nevertheless, at least in the *New Essays*, Leibniz clearly takes presumption to regulate belief and not only practice. Leibniz frequently claims that there is a presumption in favour of the possibility of any being (see Adams 1994: ch. 8). The possibility of God is the additional premise we need to fill in the Cartesian ontological argument. In the version of this argument in the *New Essays*, Leibniz says that since this premise may be presumed⁸ ‘we ought to judge that God exists *and* to act accordingly’ (NE: §4.10.7, emphasis added). Thus, presumptions (and the logical consequences that can be drawn from them) are propositions we ought to judge to be true. We do not merely act as if we judged them to be true. According to Leibniz, one should, in this way, judge the religion of one’s own country to be true on the basis of the testimony of the local religious experts.

The core problem with Locke’s individualism, according to Leibniz, is ‘that in many cases one cannot avoid yielding to authority’ (NE: §4.20.17), and this does mean yielding in belief and not only in action. At the same time, Leibniz is even clearer than Locke in accepting a reductive, evidential model of testimony, since he ‘maintains[s] that [probability] is always grounded in likelihood or conformity to truth’ (NE: §4.15.4), rejecting Locke’s distinction between two grounds of probability. How can these views be reconciled?

Leibniz is fond of courtroom analogies, particularly in this context. Jurists, Leibniz says, distinguish in their deliberations between many different ‘degrees of conjecture and of evidence’ (NE: §4.16.9). In the end, however, they must

6. In NE: §4.15.6, Leibniz’s word is in fact ‘préjugé’, but the account he gives of it is very close to his usual account of presumption.

7. On Leibniz’s treatment of presumption in the context of jurisprudence, see Blank 2006; Lærke 2018.

8. The French has ‘présumer’, although in this context Remnant and Bennet translate the word ‘assume’ rather than ‘presume’.

deliver a judgement, yea or nay. The distinction between degrees of evidence is part of the process of rendering judgement, not a feature of the judgement itself. According to Leibniz, this same procedure is ‘also serviceable in other analogous situations’ outside the juridical context (NE: §4.16.9). He also expresses hope that the emerging mathematical theory of probability might eventually displace these legal rules. However, this remains for Leibniz a part of the procedure for arriving at a judgement (belief). It is in this context that Leibniz employs his notion of presumption: where a presumption applies we may provisionally render judgement ‘as long as the contrary is not proved’ (NE: §4.16.9). Presumption provides an alternative path to rational belief, one that does not require a high degree of evidence.

Leibniz’s approach bears a striking resemblance to the view in contemporary epistemology known as ‘belief-credence dualism’ (Jackson 2019b). Dualist views admit both beliefs (Leibniz’s ‘judgements’) and credences (Leibniz’s ‘degrees of evidence’) with neither reducing to the other. On such views, belief is typically understood as regarding the truth of a proposition as settled. That is, the believer somehow commits to the truth of the proposition, or takes a side on it, or (as Leibniz would put it) renders judgement on it. It is possible, at least in principle, to assign a proposition an arbitrarily low credence and still believe it or assign it an arbitrarily high credence without believing it. (This sort of thing may be irrational but it’s not impossible.) This is because a belief represents the world as being a certain way, whereas a credence only represents the world as likely to be a certain way.⁹

Attributing this dualistic view to Leibniz allows us to make sense of his remark that ‘*presumptions* ... are accepted provisionally as complete proofs – that is, for as long as the contrary is not proved’ (NE: §4.16.9). On such a view, presumption would be a kind of epistemic permission to render judgement in favor of a proposition even if one’s own assessment of its degree of evidence was rather low.

It is also worth noting that Leibniz’s justification for this practice of allowing certain propositions to pass for true provisionally mirrors one of the more common arguments for belief-credence dualism in the recent epistemology literature. According to this view, beliefs (which are ‘all-or-nothing’ states) serve as a kind of cognitive short cut for limited, finite reasoners. We humans do not have the cognitive resources to continue to treat every proposition to which we assign a non-zero probability as a live possibility. We must therefore treat certain propositions as settled truths, despite having credence less than 1 in those propositions (Ross and Schroeder 2014; Jackson 2019b). Leibniz’s account of presumption – including reliance on expert testimony – fits this account. We are justified in relying on a presumption when our practical circumstances or the limitations of our abilities preclude undertaking our own investigation (NE: §4.15.6; T: Preliminary Dissertation §40; cf. TCR: §50).

Returning to the problem of the plurality of religions, then, Leibniz could be understood to hold that the testimony of the experts of one’s own community should have only a modest impact on one’s assessment of the degree of evidence

9. For defence of this kind of approach see Buchak 2014.

in favour of the local religion. The local experts need not, in this respect, be privileged over the foreign experts. Expert testimony, whether local or foreign, is simply empirical data. However, the testimony of the local experts renders it permissible to give one's assent – to regard the matter as settled in favour of the local religion – ‘provisionally’ but not groundlessly, while waiting for a proof to the contrary’ (NE: §4.14.4).¹⁰ The reason this is not groundless is that ‘presumptions . . . are accepted provisionally as complete proofs’ (NE: §4.16.9). In other words, the expert testimony is itself a kind of proof, but a merely provisional one. This sort of ‘proof’ (ground of belief) works, not by raising the probability, but by providing an epistemic permission to render judgement.

By this kind of dualistic epistemology – distinguishing judgement from degree of evidence – Leibniz is able to reconcile the evidence model of testimony with the presumption created by expert testimony. On Leibniz's view, the testimony of our community's experts can create an epistemic permission to render judgement (provisionally) on matters when we might otherwise be obliged to suspend judgement due to the insufficiency of the evidence we have so far evaluated. This amounts to a reductive view of the role of testimony in regulating credence, combined with a non-reductive view of the role of testimony in regulating belief.

In the specifically religious context to which Leibniz himself applies it, this account also suggests a rather interesting theory of faith. On such a view, faith can be understood as belief with low credence.¹¹ That Leibniz holds a view of faith along these general lines is further supported by his repeated insistence, in the Preliminary Dissertation to the *Theodicy*, that the ‘mysteries’ of Christianity are admitted by Christians to be improbable or ‘contrary to appearances’ (T: Preliminary Dissertation §§28–29, 32, 41–42). According to Leibniz, expert testimony is not the only possible source of presumption, and therefore may not be the only (rationally permissible) route to this kind of faith. It is, however, one route to rational belief in a proposition one takes to be improbable.

Leibniz's account of presumption is a fruitful and underexplored element of his philosophy, for epistemology generally and for religious epistemology in particular. Leibniz's account shows how belief-credence dualism opens up the possibility of combining the evidential model with a non-reductive theory of testimony: for purposes of regulating our credences, testimony might be regarded as ordinary empirical evidence, but for purposes of regulating our beliefs there might be special epistemic principles governing testimony.

10. The sort of deference to the local experts Leibniz here recommends is structurally similar to the sort of deference to one's own (previously formed) convictions recommended by Lara Buchak (2021) as a way of holding onto one's beliefs while taking disagreement with epistemic peers seriously. That is, Buchak recommends deferring to one's past self in something like the same way Leibniz recommends deferring to one's community's experts.

11. Views on which faith might, at least sometimes, involve belief with low or middling credence (and can nevertheless be rational) are defended by Elizabeth Jackson (2019a) and Lara Buchak (2021). However, in order for this to be plausible as an account of faith, one would need to reject the view that in high stakes practical decisions we must set aside our beliefs and rely on our credences—a view Jackson has elsewhere defended (Jackson 2019b). Faith would seem to require (at least a disposition to) action under conditions of risk (see Buchak 2012). In correspondence (10 January 2022), Jackson tells me that she no longer thinks we should disregard beliefs in *all* high-stakes situations, and she now thinks that (at least some) religious beliefs may be among the exceptions.

3 Astell’s Answerability Theory of Epistemic Authority

Leibniz said there was a presumption in favour of the experts recognised by one’s own community, so that we may indeed (provisionally) be ‘Heathens in *Japan*, Mahumetans in *Turkey*, Papists in *Spain*, Protestants in *England*, and Lutherans in *Sweden*’ (EHU: §4.15.6). Yet Leibniz gave no account (at least in the *New Essays*) of why I ought to defer in this way to the local experts rather than the far away ones.¹² Geography certainly can’t do this kind of epistemic work! Another contemporary of Locke and Leibniz, Mary Astell, developed an account of epistemic authority which gives a central role to the relations within a political community. In so doing she departed from the evidential model in a far more radical way than Leibniz.

There is a certain analogy between reductive theories of testimony and the social contract theories popular in early modern political philosophy. Reductive theories of testimony imagine the individual starting out as a solo inquirer and trying to find reasons to recognise epistemic authority, on the basis of general epistemic principles already recognised in that isolated condition. Social contract theories imagine the individual starting out with no social or political relations and try to show how political authority can arise from moral principles that would apply even in this ‘state of nature’.

Astell mocks social contract theorists for believing that ‘Men sprung up like so many Mushrooms . . . without Father or Mother or any sort of dependency’ (MTS: xxxv). In opposition to this absurdity, Astell maintains that social and political relations, including relations of hierarchy and authority, are fundamental to human life from the very beginning of both the species and the individual (SRM: 52; TCR: §§171–176; see Perry 1990; Bejan 2019). Failure to recognise this fact, she argues, leads to a false notion of liberty which creates opportunities for unaccountable demagogues to usurp tyrannical power (MTS: xxxvi–xxxix). True liberty, according to Astell, requires well-ordered relations of hierarchy and authority in which ‘he who Commands, has in a great measure the Faults of others to answer for as well as his own’ (SRM: 56). That is, it requires lawful

12. As Lærke (2018) shows, in his jurisprudential writings Leibniz endorses a ‘presumption of piety’ in favour of the established church which runs parallel to the ‘presumption of justice’ in favour of the established state. Both derive from a general presumption of justice (see Blank 2006): for instance, if someone is in physical possession of an object, we presume that person has a legal right to the object until the contrary is proven (see T: Preliminary Dissertation §58). However, the application of this approach to religious belief (and not merely practice) is problematic precisely because the established religious authorities of all countries have an equal presumption in their favour. True religious beliefs (unlike just laws or pious practices) cannot vary from one country to another. Perhaps Leibniz would nevertheless maintain that correct religious doctrines may vary from one country to another, since doctrinal correctness is not quite the same as truth. According to Leibniz, the public ‘formularies’ (creeds or confessions) that contain official religious doctrines ‘are like shadows of the truth and approach, more or less, the true light.’ They may be accepted ‘provided there were nothing in them inconsistent with the truth unto salvation, even though the full truth concerned were not there’ (T: Preface, p. 25). I suspect that Leibniz thinks that not only a variety of interpretations of Christianity but also Confucianism, Judaism, and Islam (at least) pass this test, but there is not space to explore this further here.

authorities who are answerable for their commands.¹³

Astell's critique of epistemological individualism runs precisely parallel to her critique of social contract theory. In fact, Astell holds that epistemic authority is a species of political authority.¹⁴

Astell's central philosophical project is the defence of women's autonomy – especially, but not only, intellectual autonomy. How can this defence be rendered consistent with Astell's defence of authority? Jacqueline Broad explains:

Astell affirms that an agent is truly autonomous when her choices and actions are motivated by a positive conception of the self, or when she lives her life in accordance with the beliefs and values of her enduring self. In her view, an agent can (and should) exercise her autonomy when choosing to render passive obedience to any religious authority. Astell's viewpoint thus challenges the idea that self-government and obedient submission are somehow mutually exclusive; an agent can be both autonomous and yet act in obedience to the dictates of the church. (Broad 2019: 727)

In other words, Astell holds that obedience to authorities one takes to be legitimate can be an expression of one's own beliefs and values. As a result, autonomy or self-government is compatible with obedience.

Broad's discussion encompasses only autonomy and obedience in choices and actions. However, in her book *The Christian Religion*, Astell applies essentially the same approach to intellectual autonomy and epistemic authority. The discussion in §§3–5 of *The Christian Religion* is a discussion of religious belief. Astell certainly agrees with many other religious thinkers that religion aims ultimately at the production of virtue (TCR: §64). Nevertheless, she would not want to minimise the doctrinal component of religion, and she explicitly affirms that Christian doctrine, and not just practice, is built on authority (TCR: §§6, 120).

As Astell herself sometimes recognises, believing on the basis of authority appears to be more problematic than acting on the basis of authority. For instance, Astell writes, 'tho' the Order of the World requires an *Outward* Respect and Obedience from some to others, yet the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the Reach of the most absolute Tyrant' (SRM: 56; cf. TCR: §249). However, in the opening sections of *The Christian Religion*, Astell pro-

13. Astell does maintain that 'Absolute or Unaccountable Power, or which is the same thing, a last Appeal, must be lodg'd some where; otherwise there is, there can be, no Government' (MTS: xxxviii). However, no human is properly unaccountable in this way, since sovereigns who abuse their power will bear 'a heavy account for the next World' (MTS: xxxvi). The only ultimately unaccountable authority is God, whose claim to authority arises not from raw power but from 'the excellency of His nature' (TCR: §174), and even God is in a way answerable to God's own wisdom. God's wisdom is a sort of law by which God governs God's power (cf. Hooker [1589–1662] 2013: 1:46–48), and in the same way the laws of parliament, which are 'the Supreme Wisdom of the State,' ought to be employed by 'the Supreme Power [that is, the monarch] . . . to Govern it self' (MTS: xxxviii). However, if the sovereign fails to be guided by the laws, there is no recourse but to God.

14. The remainder of this section is adapted from Pearce, *forthcoming*: §1.

poses to defend belief, and not only action, on the basis of authority. How can this be rendered consistent with her insistence that ‘*Everyone must judge for themselves*’ (TCR: §3)?

Astell endorses a form of doxastic voluntarism, the view that it is sometimes possible to believe (or disbelieve) at will. This view was not uncommon in the period. Descartes, for instance, holds that assent is always an act of the will (CSM: 2:39–41). Although Astell remains neutral on Descartes’s general view about the roles of will and understanding in judgement ([Astell] 1697: 101), she holds quite explicitly that ‘[religious] Faith has a mixture of the Will’ ([Astell] 1697: 82).¹⁵ There is a specific theological motivation for voluntarism about religious faith. According to traditional Christian doctrine, faith is a virtue (see, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*: II-IIq4a5) and lack of faith is sinful. But virtue and sin depend on the will. Hence, faith – which is or involves a kind of belief – must depend on the will ([Astell] 1697: 82; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*: II-IIq2a9).

Additionally, many Anglicans who, like Astell (MTS),¹⁶ opposed efforts toward more expansive toleration of religious dissent wanted to claim that there was a moral and legal obligation to adhere (sincerely) to the established church. But such (sincere) adherence involves belief, and one cannot be obligated to what does not depend on one’s will. Hence, at least some belief is voluntary. This is among the reasons for doxastic voluntarism – and specifically voluntarism about religious faith – given by Astell’s contemporary Peter Browne (LCNM: 170–175; Browne 1716; PEL: 235–255), whose theories will be discussed in the next section.

If one can believe at will, then one can believe on command. But should one ever believe on command? Further, how could such belief be consistent with judging for oneself?

Astell writes,

though reason will never permit me to submit to any mere human authority, yet there is not anything more reasonable than to submit entirely to that authority, which I find upon a strict enquiry, has all the evidences that reason can ask, to prove that it is divine. (TCR: §6)

As a Tory, Astell takes quite seriously the saying of St Paul, ‘there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God’ (Romans 13:1–2, KJV; see, for example, MTS: xxx). Lawful political and religious leaders, according to Astell, exercise divine authority, and must therefore be obeyed. As we have seen, Astell thinks that belief can be commanded, and the discussion of obedience to authorities in the opening sections of *The Christian Religion* takes place in the context of a discussion of religious belief. Thus, Astell apparently takes (at least

15. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between will and understanding in Astell’s philosophy, see Sowaal 2007.

16. For analysis of Astell’s views on moderation, toleration, and the occasional conformity controversy, see Springborg 2005: ch. 5; Broad 2015: ch. 8.

some) commands to believe to be among the commands of lawful authorities to which we must submit.

But could an individual possess epistemic authority – could we have a duty to believe that person – simply in virtue of being authorised by law, without regard to knowledge or expertise or honesty? Astell answers in the affirmative:

if . . . any point in controversy be too difficult for me . . . I will with all humility submit to God's authority in His church. Not to the man whom I may fancy or choose, for this were to follow my own way and not God's; but to him or them who shall have lawful authority over me . . . I will consult the bishop of the diocese in which I live, if it be a matter of great concern, but upon less occasions, the parish priest, to whom he has committed the cure of souls. For it is not because a man talks finely in a pulpit, or has an agreeable way in private conversation that I depend on him; or because I think he is a man of learning; or which is better, of good sense; or which is best of all, of great integrity of mind, and of a holy and unblemished conversation, as well as of sound judgment; but in pure obedience to God, who has commanded me to 'obey them who have the rule over me,' and who 'watch,' or at least ought to watch, 'for my soul' [Hebrews 13:17]. (TCR: §50)

The reference to a 'point in controversy' strongly suggests that we are, again, talking about submission in matters of belief here. Thus, Astell's view is that the clergy possess epistemic authority simply in virtue of their institutional position, without regard to whether they possess 'learning,' 'good sense,' 'integrity of mind,' or 'sound judgment.' According to Astell, I must submit to my parish priest even if I judge him to be ignorant, corrupt, and foolish.

This is apt to strike us as absurd, particularly when it is applied to belief and not only to practice. However, Astell gives a specific reason for this surprising claim:

God never requires us to submit our judgments to our fellow creatures, except in cases wherein He makes them, and not us, answerable for the error and all its evil consequences. (TCR: §3)

I will with all humility submit . . . to him or them who shall have lawful authority over me. For though they should happen to lead me into error, yet in this case they, and not I, must answer for it; as for me, I am safer in my obedience, than I could have been even with truth in a disorderly way. (TCR: §50)

The key concept here is answerability. Astell emphasises the extent to which God will hold each individual accountable for her own beliefs (TCR: §3). In a certain range of cases, however, God has indeed appointed others to judge for us. These others, 'to whom . . . has [been] committed the cure of souls' (TCR:

§50), are answerable for these judgements. It is for this reason that, under these circumstances, the layperson who errs obediently may in fact be ‘safer’ than the one who attains the truth ‘in a disorderly way.’

The talk about ‘error’ and ‘truth’ in §50 makes it clear that Astell is there speaking of epistemic authority. However, the account runs precisely parallel to her account of practical authority:

those in Authority [must] look on themselves as plac’d in their Station for the good and improvement of their Subjects, and not for their own Sakes; not as a Reward for their Merit, or that they may prosecute their own Desires and fulfil all their Pleasure, but as Representatives of GOD . . . he who Commands, has in a great measure the Faults of others to answer for as well as his own. (SRM: 56; cf. 79)

Genuine authorities – practical and epistemic – must be answerable for the faults of their subordinates.

This general approach is not obviously absurd, even by 21st century standards. It has recently been defended in detail by Benjamin McMyler (2011). According to McMyler, an epistemic authority assumes responsibility for a belief, in the sense that those who believe on his authority may defer challenges to him.¹⁷ To use McMyler’s example, if Alfred accepts a belief on Mary’s authority, and the belief is challenged, Alfred may simply respond ‘Don’t ask me; Mary’s the one who told me’ (McMyler 2011: 61). Defending the belief against challenges is Mary’s responsibility, not Alfred’s. Further, on McMyler’s account, if Alfred appropriately trusts Mary for a belief and that belief turns out to be false, Mary and not Alfred will be at fault.¹⁸

What remains strange about Astell’s position, however, is her view that people may possess this kind of authority in virtue of occupying an institutional position in church or state. Here too, however, Astell’s position is internally coherent

17. As Donald Rutherford helpfully pointed out to me, while McMyler likes to speak of an authority assuming responsibility, Astell is far more concerned with the way authorities are held responsible (answerable) by others, and especially by God. This contrast between Astell and McMyler helps to explain Astell’s focus on institutional structures, a feature absent from McMyler’s discussion.

18. On McMyler’s view, trusting Mary for a belief is very much like (to use another example McMyler discusses at length) trusting Mary to pick up the kids today (McMyler 2011: ch. 4). Alfred trusts Mary to answer any challenges to the truth of the belief that may arise. This requires an ongoing relationship between Mary and Alfred whereby Mary undertakes this responsibility and gives Alfred the right to hold her to it (even if only by, for example, feeling and expressing justified resentment if she fails, or not trusting her in the future if she fails). Typically, it will be reasonable for Alfred to enter into such a relationship only if he believes that Mary is willing and able to discharge this responsibility. As indicated above (note 17), McMyler is primarily interested in the way these relationships arise in informal social interactions, whereas Astell is interested primarily in relationships within hierarchical institutions. In Astell’s view, these relationships may be imposed by such institutions, so that I find myself in them whether I like it or not. It is for this reason that they are independent of my judgement of the authority’s trustworthiness. It is unclear whether McMyler allows for this kind of case. Nevertheless, the key commonality between McMyler and Astell is the view that an epistemic authority is a person who is responsible (answerable) for the truth of a proposition.

and contextually intelligible. According to Astell, ‘God has instituted diverse orders [of clergy] in His church, giving to them different offices and powers’ (TCR: §56). Astell argues that the system of episcopal polity (government by bishops) represents a divinely ordained mechanism whereby certain people are answerable for the spiritual well-being of Christian congregations (TCR: §§55–57; also see Astell’s remarks in Broad 2020: 65–66). When they exercise their proper authority and are appropriately obeyed by those under them, the clergy are answerable and the laypeople who defer to them are not.

Note that this is not only a matter of answerability ‘before the judgment seat of Christ’ in the afterlife (TCR: §3; quoting 2 Corinthians 5:10). As the government of the state is an earthly governing system subordinate to God, so also with the government of the church. Thus, it is the diocesan bishop who, acting on God’s behalf, ‘has committed the cure of souls’ to the parish priest (TCR: §50). There are procedures for removing heretical or corrupt or immoral priests. Thus, the parish priest’s answerability is earthly as well. It is because the clergy are answerable in this way, and can be held to account in this life and the next, that it is appropriate to defer to them.

In the *Serious Proposal*, Part II, Astell connects this idea with her more general Tory view that people are assigned by God to different stations in life:

unless we have very strange Notions of the Divine Wisdom we must needs allow that every one is placed in such a Station as they are fitted for. And if the necessity of the world requires that some Persons shou’d Labour for others, it likewise requires that others shou’d Think for them. ([Astell] 1697: 206)

The general idea, again, is that some people are assigned by God to positions of special responsibility over others, and are answerable for how they conduct themselves in those positions. This applies as much to belief as to practice.

As a general matter, Astell’s feminist project is a project of freeing women from arbitrary authority usurped by men outside the (heavenly and earthly) institutional structures that make those who wield authority answerable for their commands. Astell’s Toryism means that she is a staunch defender of these inherently hierarchical institutional structures. Part of her reason for defending this hierarchy is her belief that when power is exercised outside these structures, people (and particularly women) find themselves subjected to others who are not answerable for their well-being. If we were to sum up Astell’s idea in a slogan, it would be: no authority without answerability.¹⁹ Astell sees this dynamic in play just as much in belief as in practice: if I am to accept a belief on the authority of another, that other must be answerable for the truth of the belief and also for its practical consequences. By centring these notions of authority and answerability as inescapable features of human existence, Astell rejects Lockean individualism in both politics and epistemology, and offers a

19. The absence of earthly answerability for husbands is also a theme in Astell’s critique of ‘private Tyranny’ in the *Reflections upon Marriage* (SRM: 47). For analysis of Astell’s critique of private tyranny, see Perry 1986: 150–169; Weil 1999: ch. 6; Weiss 2004; Springborg 2005: ch. 3; Broad 2014; 2015: ch. 7.

radical challenge to the evidential model of testimony.²⁰

4 Browne’s Appropriation Theory of Testimony

Peter Browne, like Mary Astell, was a high church Anglican traditionalist in his religion and a staunch Tory in his politics. Also like Astell, Browne takes Locke as the archetype of an individualist tendency that undermines authority in belief and practice, church and state. Hence, again like Astell, Browne rejects the evidential model of testimony and develops an alternative account. However, Browne’s account, unlike Astell’s, does not rely on political notions like answerability. Instead, Browne develops an account of how, by being responsible consumers of testimony, we can ‘make what was the Knowledge of *Others* properly our *Own*’ (PEL: 275). I call this an ‘appropriation theory’, since it allows us to appropriate the knowledge of others without necessarily being aware of the evidence that backs it.

Browne’s earliest philosophical work (LCNM) was a detailed critique of John Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Like many other writers in the period (most famously Edward Stillingfleet), Browne sees Toland as simply making explicit the religious conclusions implied by Locke’s epistemology.

In *Christianity Not Mysterious*, Toland defends the view that evidence is the only ground of persuasion (CNM: 18–19). Authority, according to Toland, is only a means of information, never a ground of persuasion (CNM: 16–18, 38–39). What Toland appears to have meant by this is that I can only appropriately believe a proposition if I can see for myself that it is true. What testimony can do is prompt me to consider a particular proposition to see whether it is true. Thus, for Toland, beliefs should never be based on testimony at all. Rather, listening to others should always be like following along with a proof in a math book: their speech can, at best, direct our thought in helpful directions, to see for ourselves truths we might not otherwise have seen.²¹

According to Browne, ‘we shall see the falsity of [Toland’s account] if we consider *Authority* in respect of the Person who is inform’d, and of him who gives the information’ (LCNM: 21). Browne goes on to explain:

20. For a general reading of Astell as a critic of Locke, see Springborg 2005.

21. That Toland holds this radical view, even about the divine testimony (supposedly) found in Scripture, is supported by his description of how divine testimony was received by the prophet Jeremiah and the Virgin Mary (CNM: 44). It is also supported by his insistence that we can and should ‘strictly require . . . *Evidence* in all the Agreements and Disagreements of our Ideas in things meerly speculative, and as far as we can in Matters of common Practice’ so that we may avoid ‘a lazy Reliance upon *Authority*’ (CNM: 21). Finally, it is supported by his claim that ‘the only Marks we have to distinguish the Oracles and Will of God, from the Impostures and Traditions of Men’ are ‘*the indisputable Characters of DIVINE WISDOM and SOUND REASON*’ (CNM: 42) – or, in other words, that we should believe God has revealed a certain proposition only if we can see, based on our rational conception of God, that God would reveal such a thing. Nevertheless, Toland does not seem to be perfectly consistent on this point, and some scholars have attributed to him a more moderate position, closer to Locke’s (see, for example, Jakapi 2016; Marko 2017). What matters for present purposes is that Browne clearly read Toland as endorsing the radical view described in this paragraph.

1. In respect of the Person who is inform'd, I grant [authority] is a means of Information. . . .
2. When considered in the Informer, [authority] is a ground of Perswasion; for why do I give my assent to any Proposition related to me from another? because of the veracity and ability of the Person that makes the Information. (LCNM: 21)

According to Browne, in order to assent to a proposition on the authority of another, two things are required. First, I must be successfully 'informed' in Toland's sense: the person's speech must succeed in prompting me to entertain the proposition in question. Second, my assent must be based on the 'veracity and ability' of the other, that is, on the fact that she is not trying to deceive me and is not deceived herself. It is this fact, that the other has gotten things right and is faithfully reporting them to me, that is the ground of my persuasion – in today's terminology, this is what provides epistemic justification.

Browne imagines Toland objecting, 'how can that which is inseparable from another be the ground of any assent in my mind?' (LCNM: 22) The objection is that the 'veracity and ability' in question are epistemic virtues of the informer, not of the informed. How can I possess well-grounded assent unless I am in possession of the reasons in favour of the proposition? Browne answers, 'It is the opinion that is in me of his ability and veracity [that] is the cause of my assent. The ground of this opinion indeed is Evidence' (LCNM: 22). In other words, the assent is made my own by my assessment of the informer's reliability.

So far, it may sound as though Browne is only returning to the more moderate individualism of Locke. However, he goes on to say that in this case:

this Evidence is a ground of perswasion in respect of the worth of the Person only; and that Worth or Authority of his, is the only ground of perswasion in respect of the substance of what he relates to me. From whence it is plain, that though we grant that Evidence in the Mind is a ground of perswasion, yet it is not the only ground (LCNM: 22).

Browne wants to claim that authority is an independent, fundamental ground of persuasion. In other words, Browne is an anti-reductivist. The use of evidence with respect to testimony applies only to the decision whether to trust someone. Once I have decided to trust someone, the testimony itself serves as the ground of my persuasion.

That this is Browne's meaning is much clearer in his later work, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding* (1729). There Browne writes:

The fourth and last Head of Knowledge obtained by *Deduction of Reason* is that which is derived from the *Experience* and *Information* of others, and is founded upon *Testimony*. This . . . hath been very imperfectly defin'd, *An Assent of the Mind given to the Truth of any Thing upon the Testimony of another*; to which should have been

added, *upon a full Conviction of the Reasonableness of yielding that Assent . . .* ALL the kinds of Knowledge we have hitherto treated of arose from *Our selves*, and resulted from the *Immediate* Use and Exercise of our own *Natural Faculties*; but this is in a great measure from *Without* us, and is owing to the Reason and Understanding of *Others*: Which then becomes truly *Our own*, when we give no hasty and precarious Assent to any Information or Testimony; but use our *Reason* strictly and impartially in *Searching* and Trying every Instance of this Knowledge. (PEL: 274–275)

Browne goes on to identify three sorts of evaluation of testimony that must be undertaken by reason: we must understand the meaning of the utterance, determine whether the thing said is possible, and evaluate ‘the *Ability* and *Sincerity* of the *Person* from whom the Information comes’ (PEL: 278).²² However, again, this cannot amount merely to treating the utterance as an ordinary piece of evidence, as Locke would have us do, for in such a case our knowledge would not be ‘owing to the Reason and Understanding of *Others*’ (PEL: 275).

Browne is attempting to walk a very fine line here. He wants to hold, on the one hand, that testimony provides an independent, fundamental ground for assent but, on the other, that religious faith is not a ‘blind *Implicit Assent*’ (PEL: 275; cf. LCNM: 60, 213) such as the Catholic Church was alleged to require. Thus, he argues regarding ‘the History of *Mankind* and of *Nature*; [and] the Accounts of all the Parts of the World which we have not seen’ that ‘we acquiesce in all this as so much *Real* Knowledge, and not as any *Precarious* implicate *Belief*; but as an Assent of the Mind founded upon such human Testimony, as often amounts to a *Moral Certainty*’ (PEL: 278–279). Implicit belief – that is, assent formed by the uncritical reception of testimony – is, according to Browne, ‘precarious’. On the other hand, when we receive testimony critically then ‘by the use of our *Reason* we make what was the Knowledge of *Others* properly our *Own*’ (PEL: 275).

Browne’s view here is similar to the position recently defended by Linda Zagzebski (2012). According to Zagzebski, we reasonably accept a proposition on trust when we conscientiously judge that we are more likely to attain the truth by trusting than by withholding trust. Unlike the evidential model, where we simply weigh the likelihood of error or deceit along with all of the other evidential reasons, Zagzebski’s view involves a decision to place trust in an individual or community, and to treat the deliverances of their faculties as somehow like my own. However, this trust is still answerable to evidence insofar as evidence of deceit, gullibility, and so forth could provide reasons for withdrawing my trust. In the same way, for Browne, evidence is employed in the decision to give or withhold trust, but while I am trusting I make no use of evidence. Further, both Browne and Zagzebski hold that testimony pre-empts my own assessment of the evidence. On Browne’s view, my ‘opinion . . . of [the authority’s] ability and veracity is the cause of my assent’ (LCNM: 22) and not my assessment of the evidence. On Zagzebski’s view, ‘The fact that the authority has a belief *p* is

22. Browne enumerates a fourth sort of evaluation, determining whether ‘the *Information* or *Revelation* comes from *God*’ (PEL: 279), but this clearly could have been subsumed under the third heading.

a reason for me to believe p that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing p and is not simply added to them' (Zagzebski 2012: 107).

Zagzebski (2012: 105–113) compares testimony, on this view, with political authority. If I only follow those commands that I independently judge to be good, they turn out not to be commands at all, but rather advice. On the other hand, the question of whether the general policy of following this person's or institution's commands is likely to lead to the good may rightly play a role in whether to regard that person or institution as a legitimate authority. In the same way, when trusting, I don't rely on my own evaluation of the truth or falsity of the proposition, but I adopt trust as a strategy for getting to the truth.

According to Browne, this kind of well-grounded trust provides a method by which we can indeed 'know by other Mens Understandings' (EHU: §1.4.12). Indeed, Browne endorses precisely the view Locke had rejected in 'The Conduct of the Understanding,' that 'by reading, the author's knowledge is transfused into the reader's understanding' (Locke [1706] 1823: §24). However, in Browne's view, this does not occur when our trust in the author is 'implicit' (unquestioning), but only when it is grounded in an evidentially supported 'opinion ... of his ability and veracity' (LCNM: 22).

Astell holds that this sort of trust is grounded in social relations that enable one person to be answerable (responsible) for the beliefs of others. Browne has not rejected individualism in quite so strong a way as this: he still holds that I am ultimately responsible for all my beliefs, and cannot defer this responsibility to someone else. Further, although Browne's theory of testimony is non-reductive in the sense that testimony is governed by distinctive epistemic norms, Browne holds that receiving testimony does require a prior evidentially supported opinion (NB: not knowledge) of the testifier's trustworthiness. Nevertheless, Browne does allow that considerations about social relations can appropriately enter into my decisions about whom to trust. In this way, both Astell and Browne make epistemology social in a way that the evidential model does not allow.

5 Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief, the epistemology of testimony was not a neglected topic prior to the writings of Hume and Reid. The topic was, indeed, hotly debated. Much of this debate centred on questions about trust in the religious authorities of state churches. This can make these debates seem quaint and antiquated, since few of us today would consider forming religious beliefs on such a basis. However, as I indicated in the introduction, there are epistemic authorities recognised today whose position is structurally similar to that of early modern state-church clergy. These include the designated experts within public health agencies and environmental protection agencies, among others. It is difficult to think of any question in epistemology that is of greater practical relevance today than whether to trust these (purported) experts and, if so, why.

Locke's claim that 'we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes,

as to know by other Mens Understandings' (EHU: §1.4.12) is part of a broader rejection of the idea that what takes place in the mind of another can contribute anything positive to my epistemic condition. In different ways, Leibniz, Astell, and Browne all disagree with this claim of Locke's – as do many epistemologists today. According to Leibniz, the pronouncements of experts may create a presumption, which I've argued is best understood as a kind of epistemic permission to believe. According to Astell, the pronouncements of experts are literally commands. When I judge that the person is a legitimate authority and is acting within the scope of her authority, I ought to obey. The legitimacy of the authority depends on her being answerable for the consequences of this command, including the truth of the resulting belief. Finally, according to Browne, by adopting an attitude of trust based on an 'opinion . . . of [the] ability and veracity' of the testifier (LCNM: 22), I can make another's knowledge my own. All of these views allow social and political relations a far more central place in our epistemic economy than is possible on the evidential model.²³

Abbreviations

CNM: Toland 1696

CSM: Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny 1984–91

EHU: Locke (1690) 1975

LCNM: Browne 1697

MTS: Astell 1704

NE: Leibniz (1704) 1923–

PEL: Browne 1729

SRM: Astell (1700) 1996

T: Leibniz (1710) 1978

TCR: Astell (1705) 2013

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23. I thank Elizabeth Jackson for helpful discussion of a previous draft.

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