



Expression, testimony, and other minds

Matthew Parrott¹ 

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Abstract

People often tell us about their thoughts, feelings, and desires. This common practice has led some philosophers to claim that testimony is a fundamental way of knowing about others' minds, a way of knowing that does not epistemically depend on any other way of knowing. In this essay, I shall argue that this view is plausible only if we assume a conception of testimony that aligns it with perception. By contrast, I shall argue that if we adopt a conception of testimony as a type of assurance, then testimonial knowledge would epistemically depend upon our having some non-testimonial knowledge of others' mental states. More specifically, I shall argue, it would epistemically depend on knowledge based on expressive behaviour. Although one might naturally think this knowledge is either perceptual or inferential, I shall develop an alternative framework for explaining how expressions of mental states secure knowledge of others' minds.

1 Introduction

Several philosophical questions can arise from reflection upon our social relationships with others. Among these is the question of how exactly we are able to know what our fellow humans think, or feel, or desire; or, more generally, how we are able to know about the minds of others. This is usually called the 'epistemological problem of other minds' and, in the history of philosophy, two different answers to it stand out. There are philosophers who think our knowledge of others' minds is acquired on the basis of some kind of inference, which moves from premisses about another person's observable behaviour to a conclusion about their underlying mental states, and there are philosophers who insist that our knowledge of others' minds is a form of perceptual knowledge. Because the possibility of some other way of knowing others'

✉ Matthew Parrott
matthew.parrott@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

¹ St Hilda's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

minds is rarely considered, one gets the sense that most philosophers take these two options to be exhaustive.¹

The landscape has shifted slightly in recent years, with some philosophers beginning to explore other ways of addressing the epistemological problem. One influential suggestion, made by Anil Gomes, is that our knowledge of others' minds is acquired through testimony. Clearly, other people often do directly tell us what they think, or feel, or want, and this behaviour would unquestionably qualify as testimony with respect to facts that do not involve a person's mental states. So, the idea that people testify about their own mental states seems plausible. Indeed, as Gomes says, 'any natural and unprejudiced account of our social interactions has to accept the centrality of testimony to our knowledge of other people's mental lives.' (2015, p. 173).

Given the pervasiveness of people telling us what they think, or feel, or want, it would be unreasonable to think testimony played no role in securing knowledge of others' minds. The more interesting philosophical question is not whether we sometimes acquire knowledge of others' minds through testimony, but whether testimony could be one of the fundamental ways in which we do. With respect to this, Gomes argues that testimony can be a 'basic source of knowledge of other people's mental lives.' (2015, p. 174) Being a 'basic source of knowledge' means that testimony is a way of knowing about others' minds that does not epistemically depend upon any other way of knowing, such as perceptual or inferential knowledge.

In this essay, I shall argue that testimony cannot be a basic source of knowledge of others' minds but rather epistemically depends on a more fundamental way of knowing, knowing on the basis of expressive behaviour. My argument proceeds in two stages. First, I shall show how the validity of Gomes's argument rests on an assumption of a specific conception testimony, which takes it to be similar in certain key respects to perception. This conception is advanced explicitly by John McDowell, but the general idea can be found in the work of other philosophers as well (e.g., Burge, 1993, 1998; Coady, 1992). Under this assumption, there are structural similarities between the epistemology of testimony and the epistemology of perception, similarities which Gomes relies upon to support his argument that testimony is a basic source of knowledge of others' minds.

In the second stage, I shall argue that, if we adopt the conception of testimony found in the influential 'assurance view', then testimony cannot be a basic source of knowledge. I shall also present two reasons to support the truth of the assurance conception of testimony. But, even if those fail to convince, it is instructive to see how the question of whether testimony is a basic source of knowledge of others' minds rests on an assumption of a specific conception of what testimony is. On the assurance view, acquiring knowledge that *P* on the basis of testimony would epistemically depend on having some way of knowing that a speaker's utterance is an intentional act of informing one about *P*. This means that a listener must have some knowledge of a speaker's mind (namely, the speaker's intention) that is *not* testimonial. Rather, as we shall see, they must have a way of knowing grounded in the expressive behaviour of the speaker.

¹ This assumption may not be implausible if one thinks 'perceptual' is equivalent to 'non-inferential'.

The argument in the first three sections of this essay suggests that knowing about another mind on the basis of expressive behaviour is a more fundamental way of knowing than testimonial knowledge. The final sections of the essay will consider the question of what exactly it is for knowledge to be based on, or grounded in, expressive behaviour. We often know about another person's mental states on the basis of observing expressive behaviour, such as their smiles, or frowns, or cries of pain (cf. Green, 2007; Stein, 1916). But how exactly does expressive behaviour explain knowledge of others' minds? My proposed account involves both a metaphysical claim about the nature of expressive behaviour, and a corresponding claim about the implications this has for epistemology. To be more precise, the view I shall propose holds that part of what it is for some behaviour to be expressive is for it to occur during an interval of time during which the person exemplifying the behaviour also instantiates the mental state being expressed.² This is meant to be a thesis about the nature of expressive behaviour and, if it is true, it enables expressions to function as fact-entailing evidence for truths about others' minds. I shall argue that our sensitivity to this type of fact-entailing evidence explains how we acquire knowledge of others' minds.

2 Testimony as a basic source of knowledge

It is obvious that people testify about their own mind. My neighbour Sue tells me not only that the shop is out of milk, but that she is feeling frustrated by the Council, or that she is feeling lonely now that her daughter has gone to university, or that she wants us to form a neighbourhood WhatsApp group. In all these cases, we have the basic structure of testimony. I, the listener, acquire knowledge of some fact on the basis of Sue telling me something (cf. Coady, 1992, Ch. 2; Fricker, 1994, 2006). More schematically, central cases of testimony are ones in which someone acquires knowledge that *P* on the basis of *s* telling them that *P*.³ Thus, testimony seems like a way of acquiring knowledge of others' minds.

² The view presented in this essay can be seen as developing an intriguing suggestion which is briefly presented by J. L. Austin. When thinking about the relation between an 'emotion' and the 'natural manner of venting it', Austin describes the relation as 'peculiar and intimate' (1946, p. 180). This same idea, that there is a distinctively close relation between expressive behaviours and the mental states they express, is echoed by Richard Wollheim, who, like Austin, characterises the relation as 'intimate' (1964, p. 288).

³ The paradigm case is one in which a listener acquires knowledge that *P* because a speaker asserts something that literally means *P*. But not all cases fit this formula. There are plausibly ways for someone to attest to the truth of *P* without uttering a sentence that means *P*. Grice famously gives us the case of an academic writing a reference which states that 'Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular.' (Grice, 1967, p. 33). The letter writer tells us something about the poor philosophical abilities of the student, without asserting it. And so it seems that a speaker can testify to the truth of *P* by using some type of utterance that does not literally mean *P*. We may nevertheless count these as cases of testimony because they are cases in which the speaker intentionally utters *U* as a means of presenting *P* as true (cf. Faulkner, 2011, Ch. 1). For ease of exposition, the remainder of this essay shall focus on the simple cases in which a speaker testifies to the truth of *P* by saying '*P*'. But the arguments can easily be extended to cases like the ones Grice has in mind.

Starting from this simple observation, Gomes considers whether testimony could be a fundamental way of acquiring knowledge of others' minds. He argues for the following thesis:

3 Basic source

Testimony can be a basic source of knowledge of other people's mental states.⁴ (cf. Gomes, 2015, p. 174)

The claim that some way of knowing is a 'basic source' is a claim about the absence of epistemic dependence. A source of knowledge is 'basic' insofar as it does not *epistemically* depend upon some other source of knowledge.

The most natural way to think of such dependence is in terms of one source of knowledge depending on another for its epistemic status. Thus, suppose that I competently infer Q on the basis of $(P \vee Q)$ and $\sim P$. This reasoning would be a case in which I am able to know that Q (on the basis of the inference) only if I know that $(P \vee Q)$ and $\sim P$ are both true. My inferential knowledge that Q would epistemically depend upon my having some way of knowing the truth of premises. To say that the former epistemically depends on the latter is not just to say that the two are necessarily concomitant, or merely that one requires the other. Rather, it is to say that the epistemic status of my knowledge that Q is the case must be explained by, or appropriately grounded in, my knowledge of the premises.

To take another example, consider Austin's example of knowledge based on perceptual evidence. I know that 'some animal [on the farm] is a pig' on the basis of there being 'plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat.' (Austin, 1962, p. 115) My evidence-based knowledge that 'some animal is a pig' epistemically depends upon my having perceptual knowledge that there are 'plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat'. As these examples illustrate, epistemic dependence is a strict partial ordering on sources of knowledge.⁵

Testimony would fail to be a basic source if one's knowledge that P on the basis of testimony epistemically depended upon one having some non-testimonial knowledge that Q . One way this could happen is if we adopted a reductive view of testimonial knowledge, according to which it is analysed as a type of inferential knowledge.⁶ If a reductive account were right, then testimony could not be basic. Testimony would

⁴ This is not a direct quotation. Gomes's explicit presentation of the principle is slightly different: 'testimony can be a basic source of knowledge of other people's mental lives.' (2015, p. 174). I don't think the change is significant, and I can't imagine that Gomes would find the paraphrase objectionable.

⁵ At one point Gomes explicates the relation of epistemic dependence in existential terms, claiming that a 'basic source' of knowledge is one that can exist 'in the absence of any other source of knowledge'. (2015, p. 174). This formulation is too broad. Suppose we think there is a priori knowledge that involves empirical concepts (e.g., 'if it is sunny, then it is sunny'). Acquiring this a priori knowledge may not be possible without there being some perceptual knowledge to play an enabling role (e.g., seeing that <it is sunny outside>). In this sort of case, there would be a priori knowledge that could not exist in 'the absence' of the relevant perceptual knowledge, but it is a mistake to think that the former epistemically depends on the latter (cf. Williamson, 2013).

⁶ In the *Treatise*, Hume appears to suggest an inferential analysis (1740, 1.3.9), and more recent advocates of such a view include Fricker (1994); Lipton (1998) Malmgren (2006), and Schiffer (2001).

also not provide a distinctive line of response to the epistemological problem of other minds. It would be a vindication, in some sense, of one of the two historically dominant approaches to the problem. So, for **Basic Source** to be a substantive claim, we must assume a non-reductive account of testimony.

Yet, even on this assumption, it is not clear that testimony could possibly be a basic source of knowledge of others' minds. This is for the simple reason that it seems that acquiring knowledge that *P* on the basis of a speaker's testimony requires knowing that the speaker's utterance is an act which expresses her knowledge (or belief) that *P*.⁷ If I fail to take a speaker's utterance to be an act which expresses her knowledge (or belief), then I won't be in a position to know that *P* on the basis of what the speaker said.⁸ Or, more simply, testimonial knowledge seems to require knowing that the speaker in question is a thinker, and has a mind.

Gomes's argument for **Basic Source** rejects this line of thinking. He bases his argument on a distinction between the following two claims:

(Q1) In order to know that *P* on the basis of testimony from O, one must know that O.

is a thinker.

And.

(Q2) In order to know that *P* on the basis of testimony from O, one must now that O is a thinker *independently* of what one takes oneself to know about her on the basis of testimony. (2015, pp. 179–80)

Gomes argues that even if testimonial knowledge requires, in some sense, knowledge that a person is a thinker, as Q1 states, this is not a threat to **Basic Source**. This is because the principle that testimonial knowledge requires knowing that someone is a thinker does not entail that the former epistemically depends on the latter. Instead, there could be some other type of counterfactual dependence, or modal co-variation, between the two. This would allow the possibility that a single act of testimony can itself give a listener reason to believe that *P* and, at the same time, a reason to believe that a speaker is expressing her thoughts, or knowledge, or beliefs. As Gomes says, 'it is in virtue of hearing what it is that she has said that you know both what she thinks and that she is a thinker.' (2015, p. 180)

In developing this argument, Gomes follows philosophers like McDowell, who, though they wish to resist reducing testimonial knowledge to perceptual knowledge, nevertheless think there are important parallels between the two. For McDowell, testimony and perception are both 'mediated' ways of knowing about the empirical

⁷ Quassim Cassam is getting at this point when he claims that 'I'm only going to take someone else's word for it that I am not alone in the world if I take it that his words are expressive of genuine thoughts.' (Cassam, 2007, p. 157; cf. Moran, 2018). Cassam claims that a speaker's words need to be 'taken' by a listener to be expressing the speaker's thoughts, but, in cases of genuine testimony, cases in which a listener actually acquires testimonial knowledge, the speaker's words *do* express her thoughts. Gomes makes a similar restriction, but he chooses to explicate the condition in the good case in a slightly puzzling way, as 'knowing that another person's words express thoughts.' (2015, p.177). It isn't clear to me that a listener really needs knowledge that an utterance *is* expressive, which would be knowledge about the character of a speech act. Rather, it seems more likely that the speaker just knows the mental state being expressed by the utterance (cf. Longworth, 2018).

⁸ This sort of reasoning can be disputed. Longworth (2018), for instance, argues that understanding that *P* is sufficient for warranting the acceptance of *P*.

world. To be ‘mediated’ in McDowell’s sense does *not* mean that a way of knowing is epistemically supported by inference or argument. Rather, it means that it is a way of knowing on the basis of certain rational considerations; or, as McDowell puts it, it is ‘a standing in the space of reasons...mediated by the rational force of surrounding considerations’ even though its ‘epistemic satisfactoriness’ does not consist in that ‘rational force’. (1994, p. 430) This is very abstract, but with respect to perception, McDowell’s picture is that an individual can acquire perceptual knowledge that *P* (which would be occupying an ‘epistemically satisfactory’ standing in the ‘space of reasons’) by virtue seeing the fact that *P*. However, McDowell also thinks the knowing perceiver must be responsive to the ‘rational force’ of how the world appears. Seeing that *P* is ‘mediated’ in the sense that it counts as a ‘satisfactory’ standing in the space of reasons—it counts as a way of knowing—only if a perceiver is ‘rationally responsive to the bearing of how things look on how they are.’ (1994, p. 430) However, McDowell repeatedly insists that a perceiver can exhibit this sort of rational sensitivity to ‘how things look’ without having to know anything at all about the appearances of objects, or about how they may or may not bear on the perceiver’s knowledge.

As general picture of the epistemology of perception, this isn’t implausible. Consider a simple case of visual knowledge. The apple on my desk has a certain visual appearance *L*, and my visual system enables me to be directly acquainted with *L*. Part of what is it is for something to be an epistemic capacity is that I can exercise it in a manner that suffices for knowledge. Plausibly, being visually acquainted with *L* puts me in a position to exercise my perceptual-epistemic capacities, and thereby gain knowledge that the apple is red. As long as I am appropriately sensitive to *L*, and my capacities are functioning as they should, I am able to know by seeing that the apple is red.

The key idea behind McDowell’s picture is that one is able to acquire knowledge of the world simply by having well-functioning epistemic capacities that put one in direct contact with the fact that *P* (cf. McDowell, 1982, 2010, and, 2013; cf. Gaskin, 2025).⁹ If we are thinking of perception as a kind of cognitive openness to facts, as something that yields knowledge that *P* by virtue of functioning properly, it allows for the possibility that it is by virtue of having the perceptual experience of *P* that one knows that one is perceiving that *P*. As Gomes explains, ‘on this picture, a subject’s knowledge that she is perceiving has its root in the same source as her knowledge of

⁹ Gomes draws on McDowell’s analogy between perception and testimony. Yet, there are views that differ from McDowell, but also stress the importance of similarities between the epistemology of perception and the epistemology of testimony. Perhaps most notably, Burge (1993, 1998) argues that the rational entitlement to beliefs based on testimony is structurally similar to the *prima facie* entitlement we have for ordinary perceptual beliefs. For Burge, this means that a listener is a priori entitled to accept as true any proposition presented as true (Burge calls this the ‘Acceptance Principle’), even though that *prima facie* entitlement may be defeated by further considerations. Since Burge thinks the *prima facie* entitlement is in place even in bad cases, like cases of lying, his view would not be acceptable to McDowell. This is because it would be a version of the ‘highest common factor’ approach that McDowell criticises in various places (cf. 1982; 1994, Lecture 6). Nevertheless, I think that one could develop a version of Gomes’s argument using a view more like Burge’s, but the arguments in Sect. 3 would still apply. Those arguments are directed at any theory that took the epistemology of testimony to be analogous to the epistemology of perception.

how things stand around her, namely the correct operation of her sensory capacities upon the environment.’ (2015, p. 179)

If we conceive of testimony as analogous to perception in this respect, we can apply this same reasoning to testimonial knowledge. The resulting view would hold that, even if it is true that, in order to know that *P* on the basis of testimony from *S*, one must know that *S* is a thinker, this latter knowledge does not need to be acquired independently of what one knows on the basis of testimony. Testimony can be a basic source of knowledge because this requirement would not imply that testimonial knowledge of another mind epistemically depended upon having a distinct way of knowing that *S* is a thinker.

4 Testimony as assurance

The conception of testimony at play in the previous section holds that the successful operation of an epistemic capacity does not epistemically depend upon some other type of knowledge, including, importantly, knowledge about the functioning of that capacity, or about any potential ‘mediators’ upon which the capacity might rely. As we saw, for perception, the general picture is one on which epistemic capacities simply allow us to be directly acquainted with how things are in the world.

With respect to testimony, the analogue of an object’s visual appearance would plausibly be a speaker’s assertion, or utterance, of ‘*P*’. So, if we wish to complete the analogy, we need to hold that a listener is able to know that *P* on the basis of being directly acquainted with an assertion or utterance of ‘*P*’, and then exercising her epistemic capacities in the appropriate way. The listener would not need to know anything about the speech act performed, nor formulate any thoughts about how any of her epistemic capacities operate. It seems to me that if we were to accept this conception of testimony, then Gomes’s argument would be correct. But should we accept it?

One reason to be reluctant is that this is a conception of testimony that takes a speaker’s assertions to be the primary features of the external environment to which listeners respond. In other words, by characterising testimony in terms of a listener’s responses to assertions, the status of a class of utterances as assertions is taken for granted. Our focus is then narrowed to understanding how a listener can be in a position to acquire knowledge by responding to *assertions*. But it not obvious that assertions are the principal thing we respond to in testimony (cf. Craig, 1991). For this reason, several philosophers have argued that a theory of testimony which focuses on assertions overlooks the important fact that the primary object of trust is not an assertion, or utterance, but a *speaker* (e.g., Faulkner, 2011; Hinchman, 2005, 2014; Moran 2005, 2018).

A second thing that suggests there is a disanalogy between testimony and perception is the fact that taking a speaker’s word for something is not quite like accepting the content of a perceptual experience. Suppose I am seeing the red apple on the table in ordinary daylight. In this case my perceptual capacities generate a conscious visual experience of the red apple. It is extremely plausible that I am able to know that the apple is red because I see that it is. As we have seen, it is also plausible that I do not have to recognize or consider my conscious experience as an instance of seeing in

order to know that the apple is red. In other words, it seems that I could have a completely neutral attitude toward my conscious experience, or no attitude at all, without either of those things having any consequences for the epistemic significance of my experience.¹⁰

It is not clear that this same sort of neutral stance can be taken to the experience of hearing testimony without that undermining its epistemic status. Suppose I hear my neighbour Sue say, 'I feel frustrated with the Council'. Sue might be asserting something about her feelings, but these are words she could use in a variety of conversational contexts (cf. Davidson, 1979; Moran, 2019). Sue might be telling a joke, or she might be practicing for a performance, or, more commonly, she might be reporting what someone else said by using direct quotation. Each of these speech acts is very different and each determines a different range of appropriate responses. Unlike visual consciousness of the red apple, my bare auditory consciousness of Sue's utterance does not have any unambiguous epistemic significance. Rather, it seems that I need to understand which type of speech act Sue is performing. But this understanding would be missing if I took up a neutral attitude toward the content of my auditory experience. So, although occupying a standpoint of neutrality would not eliminate auditory consciousness of Sue's utterance, it is not clear that I would retain any reason to believe that content is true.

Some philosophers might hope to resist this by arguing that a listener has a default entitlement to take a speaker's utterances to be assertions, even if that entitlement can be defeated by further considerations. This idea has been defended by Tyler Burge, who thinks that 'a person is a priori entitled to accept a proposition that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so.' (1993, p. 238; cf. 1998). For Burge any intelligible utterance of 'P' counts as a 'presentation' of P as true, and so it is something a listener is entitled to accept as an assertion of P 'unless there are stronger reasons' not to.

Burge's view raises several questions, which we cannot pursue here. The most significant of these is explanatory. What exactly explains a listener's entitlement to take intelligible utterances of 'P' to be assertions, or 'presentations' of content as true? Burge tells us that if a speaker is a 'rational source, then it is a prima facie source of truth.' (1993), p. 239). He also tells us that listeners are entitled to accept presentations of content because the instantiation of content 'is constitutively dependent, in the first instance, on patterned connections to a subject matter, connections that ensure in normal circumstances a baseline of true thought presentations.' (1993, p. 240; cf. 1998; 2011). But why are the illocutionary acts that Sue could be engaged in, such as telling a joke, or directly quoting someone, not normal circumstances? Why is the default position to take a speaker's utterances to be assertive? Even if there are some contexts in which assertion is the default practice, it isn't clear why this generalises to other contexts in which a listener could hear an utterance of 'P',

¹⁰ This is point if familiar from discussions of dogmatism (e.g., Pryor, 1990; cf. Burge, 1993). It is worth keeping in mind that McDowell is not a dogmatist. Nevertheless, I think he would agree that one need not have any attitudes about ones conscious experiences, nor about the psychological processes that generate them in order to be in a position to know that the apple is red (cf. McDowell, 2013). He would just disagree with the dogmatist about whether the same is true in cases of illusion or hallucination (cf. Soteriou, 2016, Ch. 5).

circumstances which strike me as perfectly normal. So, we lack an explanation of why the ‘patterned connections’ which Burge gestures towards really do ‘ensure’ that we enjoy a default entitlement to take utterances to be assertions, rather than, for instance, having an entitlement to accept the class of utterances that we understand to be assertions on other grounds.¹¹

There is more that could be said about Burge’s entitlement view, but, for the sake of concision, I shall set it aside for the remainder of this essay. The preceding discussion suffices to motivate a conception of testimony which is not strictly analogous to perception. Let’s consider one extremely influential theory that has been developed along these lines, which aims to foreground the role of the speaker. This is the ‘assurance’ view developed most prominently by Richard Moran. According to Moran’s model, an act of testifying (or ‘telling’) is intended by the speaker to *assure* a listener that *P* is true. Moran calls this an essentially ‘social act’ because in order for the speaker to succeed in informing the listener, ‘the other person has to *understand her*’ (Moran, 2018, p. 21; cf. p. 167). On Moran’s view, this means that, for any verbal act to *be* an act of testimony, a listener must recognize it as a telling. In other words, the listener must recognize that the speaker is acting with the intention to inform them about the truth of *P*. Furthermore, the listener’s recognition of the speaker’s intention is possible only if the speaker has expressed the intention to inform the listener about the truth of *P*. As Moran says, acts of testimony ‘only exist and are complete insofar as they are expressed in words to another intelligent being; in short they exist in being addressed to another person, and understood and taken up by that person in a certain way.’ (2018, p. 3; cf. Marusic, 2025).

Thus, on Moran’s assurance view, it is a condition on testifying that a speaker’s act clearly express her intention to inform or assure the listener. This is because without the listener’s recognition of this intention, the speaker’s words just would not be a reason to believe that *P*. Here is how Moran describes the condition:

The epistemic status of her words as a candidate for belief is something publicly conferred on them by the speaker, by presenting her utterance as an assertion. And indeed, it is *because* the speaker’s words have no independent status as evidence that their contribution to the audience’s belief must proceed through the recognition of the speaker’s intention. Further, the intention seeking recognition must not simply be that the audience come to believe something, but must include the intention that the audience recognize the speaker’s act of assertion as itself constituting a potential reason for belief. (2018, p. 57)

On the assurance view, testifying is an act in which a speaker *uses her words* to assume epistemic responsibility for the truth of *P*. This assumption of responsibility

¹¹ Sometimes Burge writes as if the entitlement applies only to contents that are independently *understood* to be assertions. For instance, he says ‘understanding content requires (in normal cases) understanding the attitudinal (e.g., assertive) mode of the content.’ (1998, p. 265) This is claim, as we shall see, that a defender of the assurance view also accepts. However, unlike the assurance theorist, Burge seems to think that understanding the assertive mode is just part of what is involved in understanding the content. He says, for instance, that ‘understanding content presupposes and is interdependent with understand the force of presentations of content.’ (1993, p. 247). This is not an argument. So it remains unclear why we should think there is such an interdependence between utterances of ‘P’ and assertive force (for articulation of the opposing view see Davidson, 1979).

is why her use of words can be a form of assurance, and so this is how the speaker assures the listener that *P* is true. Crucially, however, the speaker's words function as an assurance for the listener only if the listener recognizes those words as uttered with the specific intention to inform them that *P* is true.

Notice that if we accept the assurance view, it follows that there is an epistemic condition on the *existence* of testimony.¹² Specifically, a particular speech act could be an act of testifying only if a listener knows the speaker intends to inform them by virtue of uttering 'P'. Thus, for the assurance theorist, the identity conditions of testimony constitutively depend upon a listener having some non-testimonial knowledge of a speaker's mind, knowledge which Moran says is grounded in the speaker's expression of her intention to inform the listener (cf. Leite, 2019).

For this reason, if we accept the assurance conception, it is difficult to see how **Basic Source** could be right. Testimonial knowledge that *P* would epistemically depend upon knowing about the speaker's intention to inform the listener about the truth of *P*. Gomes could be correct that it 'is in virtue of hearing what it is that she has said that you know both what she thinks and that she is a thinker.' That is to say that there need be no distinct act or event that provides information about a speaker's intentions. Nevertheless, claims about epistemic dependence should not be confused with claims about temporal priority. Since a listener does not acquire *testimonial knowledge* that the speaker has the intention to inform her about the truth of *P* (speakers do not typically tell us about these intentions), the listener's knowledge of the speaker's intention must be grounded in some non-testimonial source. What might this be?

One thought that is central to Moran's presentation of the assurance view is that a speaker's intention to inform a listener is something that gets *expressed* by her speech acts. This implies that a listener's capacity to acquire knowledge on the basis of recognising expressive behaviour explains or grounds her testimonial knowledge. The idea that we gain knowledge of others' minds on the basis of expressive behaviour is not radical or revisionary. We frequently acquire knowledge of a person's mental states through bodily or facial expressions, and, even in the verbal domain, there are many familiar cases of knowledge based on expressive behaviour (cf. Green, 2007; Gomes, 2019). Consider, for example, a case in which a person says something to insinuate that she feels annoyed by the work habits of a mutual colleague, or that she is shocked by the approach to parenting taken by close friends. In these cases, it would be natural to think we acquire knowledge on the basis of expressive behaviour, especially because the speaker does not even have the intention to directly inform us (cf. Strawson, 1964). Indeed, a range of cases suggests that knowledge based on expressive behaviour may be a basic source of knowledge of others' minds. This is the idea I shall explore in the remainder of the essay.

¹² The assurance view is not the only model of testimony that would have this result. The same would hold, for example, on David Owens's 'Belief Expression' conception of testimony (Owens, 2006), or for a conception that took testimony to be based on a speaker expressing her knowledge that *P* (cf. Fricker, 2006; Longworth, 2020). This is not the place to discuss these different conceptions of testimony, but the argument against Gomes would go through, *mutatis mutandis*, on these conceptions as well.

5 Knowledge grounded in expressive behaviour

We frequently talk about people's expressive behaviour, as when I ask my daughter why she looks grumpy today.¹³ Popular culture is unrelenting in its encouragement to express ourselves better, or more authentically. Even philosophers who have been tempted by a perceptual account of our knowledge of others' minds frequently support their position with reference to expressive behaviour. McDowell, for instance, suggests that we can perceive that a person is in pain in their 'facial expression'. (1978, p. 305; cf. Green, 2010, McDowell, 1982) And, it is because expressive behaviour figures so prominently in social interaction that, in a more recent essay, Gomes reminds us that 'it is part of common sense...that we come to know others' minds on the basis of [...] expressions.' (2019, p. 164)

But how exactly is knowledge of others' minds grounded in expressive behaviour? The standard options are familiar: it is either inferential or perceptual. The second of these is what we would naturally think if we thought of expressive behaviours as more or less equivalent to perceptual appearances. Just as the apple on my desk has a distinctive visual appearance which enables me to acquire knowledge that it is red, we might think that Sue's feeling of frustration has a distinctive appearance, something like her sighing loudly, or clenching her teeth. As Will McNeill notes, this way of thinking about expressive behaviours treats them 'as a class of *appearance property* which, in the right circumstances, would put you in a position to know some aspect of another's mind.' (2019, p. 182).

In other work, I have argued against the view that knowledge based on expressive behaviour is a type of perceptual knowledge, so I won't repeat those arguments here (Parrott, 2017). But if we set the perceptual model to one side, does this mean that expression-based knowledge is inferential? There are some theorists who envision inferential knowledge as a kind of probabilistic inference (cf. Zalabardo, 2012). This makes it natural to think inferential knowledge is fallible, or is a way of knowing that cannot conclusively establish the proposition that one comes to know. This is typically the case when we come to acquire knowledge that P on the basis of induction from some body of evidence. In these cases, we come to know that P by virtue of being acquainted with evidence E and knowing, in some sense, that E significantly increases the probability of P being true (viz., the conditional probability $(P|E)$ is sufficiently high). There is nothing incoherent about this way of thinking about inferential knowledge, but there are certain forms of reasoning that we might naturally think of as inferences but which, though they can be forced into this probabilistic framework, are not most at home in it.

Consider knowledge based on deductive reasoning. Suppose that I fancy something sweet this morning, and that I also know that if today is Thursday, then the coffee shop sells donuts. A few moments later, I look at the newspaper and I see that today is indeed Thursday. Because I know those two propositions, I can competently deduce that the coffee shop sells donuts today, and make plans accordingly. My

¹³ Within the category of 'expressive behaviour', we may wish to draw further distinctions, for instance, between expressive actions, voluntary expressions, and passive expressions. These distinctions can be glossed over for the purposes of this essay, but for discussion see Hertzberg (2009).

knowledge of this last claim was arrived at on the basis of reasoning, but my inference conclusively establishes that the coffee shop sells donuts today. If I carried out the reasoning correctly, and I *did* know the premisses, then the truth of the conclusion is guaranteed. The inferential basis of my reasoning entails the truth of the proposition <the coffee shop sells donuts today>.

There is a good reason to think knowledge based on expressive behaviour has the same structure as deductive inferential knowledge. In ordinary language, the terms ‘expressing’ and ‘manifesting’ are factive. For example, the truth of the sentence ‘Sue is expressing her frustration at the Council’ entails that Sue feels frustrated at the Council. The factivity of these locutions indicates that any behaviour which does express a mental state M entails the existence of M .¹⁴ The argument for this conclusion is explanatory. If we wish to account for the factivity of sentences which we use to attribute expressive behaviour, the best explanation will appeal to an entailment relation between behaviours which express M and M .

One consequence of this entailment relation is that expressive behaviour could function as fact-entailing evidence for knowledge of others’ minds (cf. Gomes, 2019; Parrott, 2017). So, if someone were to come to know that P on the basis of such evidence, that knowledge would be based on conclusive grounds for the truth of P . It would guarantee that P is true. Gomes comes to a similar conclusion about what he calls ‘expressive knowledge’¹⁵:

If we know that Rahul is angry on the basis of his expression of anger, and if his expression of anger entails that he is angry, then we know that he is angry on the basis of something which doesn’t fall short in the way that evidence falls short.’ (Gomes, 2019, p. 159).

Yet, even though the factivity of ‘expression’ locutions indicates that expressive behaviour does function as fact-entailing evidence, or ‘doesn’t fall short’ of the facts, we need a better understanding of how this is possible. That is, we need an explanation of why it is that expressions of M entail the existence of M .

More precisely, for this sort of entailment to hold, there would need to be some kind of necessary connection between expressive behaviours and the underlying mental states which they express. There are several ways to explicate such a relation, some of which would have the consequence of denying that an expression of M is existentially distinct from M (i.e., behaviourism). However, if we want to maintain the common-sense intuition that expressions of M are distinct from M , then a plausible way to think of the necessary connection between them is as a type of metaphysical dependence (cf. Audi, 2012, Rosen, 2010). In other words, we can hold a view which claims that part of what it is for an event to *be* an expression of M is for it to occur during an interval of time during which the individual expressing M also exemplifies M . Because this would be part of what it is to be an expression, the expression of M would metaphysically depend on, or occur ‘in virtue of’, or be grounded in, the mental phenomenon in

¹⁴ Perhaps the entailment need not be direct. It is logically possible that expressions of M entail M by means of entailing some intermediate state which itself entails M .

¹⁵ Gomes labels this knowledge ‘expressive knowledge’ to distinguish it from perceptual knowledge and knowledge based on evidence, whereas I have referred to it as ‘inferential knowledge’, but conceive of this as encompassing more than knowledge based on evidence. The difference between these is, it seems to me, purely terminological.

question. (Gomes, 2019, p. 169; cf. Leite, 2019; Parrott, 2017, forthcoming). Metaphysical dependence or grounding relations like this have modal consequences, and so this would mean that expressions of *M* entail the existence of *M*. Thus, a framework according to which expressive behaviours occur in virtue of the underlying mental states which they express would allow us to explain how it is that expressive behaviours can function as fact-entailing evidence for our knowledge of others' minds.

I think the preceding picture of expression-based knowledge is appealing, but more needs to be said about different types of expressive behaviours, and about the development of the recognitional capacities which allow us to know about another person's mental states on their basis. It also seems that there is much more to be said about the category of 'the expressive' within the social world more broadly, including, for instance, its importance for various types of ethical responses and its relation to social conventions. However, this is not the appropriate place to pursue these issues. Instead, in the following section, I shall respond to an important objection to the sort of account of expression-based knowledge just presented.

6 Expressions

The strongest objection to the sort of proposal presented in the previous section is one that denies there are necessary connections between expressive behaviours and the mental states which they express. This objection gains credibility from the fact that there is an attractive alternative view, which holds that the two stand in a merely causal relation. According to this view, it is sufficient for some behaviour to be an expression of *M* if it is simply *caused* by *M*. But if expressive behaviours were merely causally produced by underlying mental states, then the relation between them would be contingent. So even if those behaviours were a basis for knowledge, they would not be a fact-entailing basis. It would be possible, at least in some cases, for a person's behaviour to express *M*, even though the person does not really instantiate *M*.

Moran is sympathetic to this sort of view because he thinks much 'expression' talk is not factive. Indeed, he frequently stresses the distinction between two different senses of 'expression', what he calls the 'personal' sense and what he calls the 'impersonal sense'. (2018, Ch. 3) A similar distinction is made by McNeill who calls the former 'b-expressions' and the latter 'm-expressions'. (2019, p. 179) For both, there is one sense of the term 'expression', the 'personal' or 'b' sense, which is not factive. Moran explicitly says that the non-factive notion is operative in cases of ordinary assertion, a point which he illustrates with the example of lying. According to Moran, when a liar sincerely asserts 'P', she 'expresses a belief that she does not have.' (2018, p. 87) McNeill agrees that there is a non-factive sense of 'expression', and he uses acting as his illustrative example. McNeill asks us to imagine an actor who intentionally expresses anger while feeling 'perfectly content'. McNeill suggests the actor is genuinely expressing anger, which he thinks is supported by the audience being perfectly clear about 'which emotional state is being portrayed'. (McNeill, 2019, p. 179)

For both Moran and McNeill, the non-factive sense of 'expression' is central to social interaction. Thus, a person who asserts 'P' can express both the belief that *P* and the intention to inform a listener of *P*, without having either one. Both Moran and

McNeill acknowledge that ‘expression’ also has a factive sense, they just deny that assertions are ‘expressive’ in that sense. Their reason for this appears to be just their intuition that someone who is lying or insincere is nevertheless manifesting expressive behaviour.

It is clearly true that in these cases, a person is doing something which we would *take* to be expressive. But why should we conclude that our natural reaction is correct? Why not think that our initial response is mistaken, since there is no corresponding mental state to be expressed? Both the liar and the actor present cases in which people manifest behaviour that is indistinguishable from genuinely expressive behaviour, but this does not mean that it really is expressive. So we are not forced to accept the strange conclusion that there can be expressions of mental states possessed by nobody.

This point is familiar from some discussions of insincerity. Bernard Williams, for instance, claims that assertions are ‘direct’ expressions of a speaker’s beliefs and that someone ‘can express his belief that *P* only if he has that belief.’ (2002, p. 73) This is developed further by David Owens, who argues that it follows from a more general principle. According to Owens ‘expressing a belief in action is one way of *acting on* that belief and one can’t act on a belief which one does not have.’ (Owens, 2006, p. 109; cf. Sellars, 1969) Owens’s point can be generalised to cover any case in which a person intentionally performs an expressive act. Whenever someone intentionally expresses *M*, if Owens is right, they are ‘acting on’ *M*, and one cannot act on a mental state that one does not have.

Despite this, some philosophers may prefer to hold onto the idea that the behaviours of liars and actors should count as genuinely ‘expressive’. This would require adopting a view like Moran’s or McNeill’s, according to which ‘express’ and cognates are ambiguous. Yet, importantly, the resulting view would not logically imply that the behaviours exhibited by the liar or actor were fundamentally of the same kind as sincere expressive behaviours.

For this reason, someone who wanted to maintain that the behaviour of actors and liars ought to be classified as ‘expressive’ could opt for a kind of disjunctive theory of expressive behaviour:

7 Disjunctive theory of expressive behaviour

A’s behaviour B expresses mental state *M* only if either it is a case of A manifesting B in virtue of having *M*; OR it is a case of it merely seeming that A is manifesting B in virtue of having *M*. (cf. Williams 2002, p. 74)

According to the disjunctive theory, behaviour counts as expressive only if it is either a genuine expression of an underlying mental state, or if it merely seems to be so.¹⁶ Notably, under the first disjunct, there would still be a necessary connection between expressive behaviour and the mental states which they express, and so they would continue to function as fact-entailing evidence for knowledge of others’ minds, even if behaviour falling under the second disjunct could not. This is because, as Richard Gaskin points out,

¹⁶ This is not intended to be an analysis of ‘expressive behaviour’, which would be circular. For further discussion of this type of view, see Longworth (2017).

the disjunctivist holds that ‘while it is true that the two disjuncts of our scenario share a common feature, it is not the case that the perceiving subject, if located on the “good” disjunct, *starts*, epistemically speaking, from that commonality.’ (2025, p. 66)

Furthermore, there is a good reason to think that genuinely expressive behaviour is more fundamental to social interaction. Both Moran’s liar and McNeill’s actor ‘express’ mental states in a way that is obviously parasitic on genuine expressions. The only reason the actor can be considered to be ‘expressing anger’ is that he is doing something that is relevantly similar to an authentic expression. Indeed, Moran’s liar is, as Williams tells us, aiming to ‘misinform the hearer about [their] beliefs’ (2002, pg. 73). Therefore, cases in which someone is insincere, or pretending are conceptually derivative from cases in which expressions are authentic. If there were no such thing as behaviour which occurs in virtue of the presence of anger or belief, it would not even be intelligible to think of the actor or liar as doing something expressive. Case of lying or acting are, in this sense, dependent upon cases of sincere speech and genuine expression—they are actions purporting to be authentic (cf. Gaskin, 2025).

Secondly, even though the non-factive sense of ‘expression’ introduced by McNeill and Moran is stipulative, it seems to me that we could felicitously eliminate ‘expression’ language from their cases. Sellars distinguishes between different senses of ‘expression’, one of which he calls a ‘logical’ or ‘semantical’. For Sellars, an identifying mark of the semantic sense of ‘expression’ is that its direct object is not introduced by a possessive pronoun, but by the definite article. Thus, Sellars notes we can distinguish the following claims:

- (1) ‘A’s utterance of “snow is white” expressed *her* thought that snow is white’.
- (2) ‘A’s utterance of “snow is white” expressed *the* thought that snow is white’.

The former, Sellars claims, is a sentence about the character of A’s speech act and, according to Sellars, is factive. The latter, however, is a claim about the *meaning* of A’s utterance, which is why Sellars calls it ‘semantical’ (1969, pp. 520–21). Whenever ‘express’ (or cognates) occurs in the semantic sense, it can be substituted with ‘means’ (or cognates). Thus, we can substitute (2) with ‘A’s utterance of “snow is white” meant that snow is white’.

Accordingly, the first sentence in each of the following pairs sounds wrong, or at least significantly strained:

- (3) The liar’s utterance of ‘P’ expressed *her* thought that *P*.
- (3*) The liar’s utterance of ‘P’ expressed *the* thought that *P*.
- (4) The actor’s utterance of ‘P’ expressed *her* anger.
- (4*) The actor’s utterance of ‘P’ expressed (*the*) anger.¹⁷

On Sellars’s view, this shows that 3* and 4* are semantically expressing a proposition, rather than expressing any underlying mental state. Although details would

¹⁷ In English, of course, the definite article is omitted.

need filling in, it seems to me that the cases discussed by Moran and McNeill could plausibly be rephrased in these terms.¹⁸

There is one final worry we should consider. Even if the disjunctive theory of behaviour is theoretically well-motivated, it does not entail that expression-based knowledge is *actually* based on the fact-entailing, or ‘good’, disjunct. Indeed, one might reasonably think the recognitional capacities implicated in the reception of testimony are actually tracking the disjunctive kind, rather the fact-entailing disjunct. After all, the two disjuncts are subjectively indistinguishable, so how could one have a recognitional capacity that tracks only one of them? But if our epistemic capacities are tuned into disjunctive facts, then the fact that genuine expressions are necessarily connected to mental states would not be the sort of relation those capacities could exploit.

One can find this sort of objection in philosophical discussions of disjunctivism about perception. The standard response is to deny that our epistemic capacities are insensitive to differences between good and bad disjuncts. McDowell has repeatedly made such an argument with respect to perceptual-recognitional capacities. According to McDowell, it would be a mistake to conclude from the fact that cases of veridical experience cannot be discriminated from cases of perfect hallucination that the two have the same epistemic significance (McDowell, 2013; cf. McDowell, 1982). Moreover, McDowell thinks we should individuate perceptual-recognitional capacities in epistemic terms, by the fact that they are capacities to access what McDowell calls ‘conclusive grounds’ for empirical knowledge. Once we fully appreciate this, we can see that those capacities function to track ‘indefeasible [i.e. conclusive] warrant[s]’ sufficient on their own to ground knowledge (2013, p. 246; cf. French, 2016).¹⁹

There is, it seems to me, a good argument to support McDowell’s picture. As a matter of principle, we ought to individuate epistemic capacities in terms of ‘conclusive’ or fact-entailing grounds whenever those grounds play a privileged role in a successful explanation of the existence of those very capacities. As a matter of fact, the natural world is literally teeming with cases where the fact that an organism’s recognitional capacities have evolved over time to track some feature or property is what explains why those capacities are deceived in bad cases.

Batesian mimicry is the widespread phenomenon where a harmless species evolves to imitate the warning signals of a harmful species (Ruxton et al., 2018, Ch. 10). For example, hoverflies have evolved to mimic the visual appearance of bees or wasps, which sting and are unpalatable to natural predators. The evolutionary explanation of

¹⁸ This depends on how we fill out the case. The actor could be doing something that mimics or copies something that we think of as naturally meaning anger, like gritting their teeth. But this sort of behaviour is not relevant to the question we are considering here.

¹⁹ This is an epistemological view which accepts a kind of epistemic externalism and therefore does not require that an agent can tell the difference between the good cases and the misleading cases in order to have knowledge. Those who are attracted to more internalist theories will resist this and will take indiscriminability to have consequences for knowledge. There is no space to argue for epistemological externalism in this essay, so I shall just assume that it is true, both for the perceptual case and for knowledge of other minds. Some philosophers may worry about this because it might seem that if one cannot tell the difference between the bad case and the good case, then one also cannot tell that one is in a good case, whenever one is. For a response to this sort of worry, see Chap. 8 of Williamson (2000).

why hoverflies developed this type of deceptive appearance directly appeals, among other things, to the fact that pigeons have the epistemic capacity to recognize the appearance of harmful wasps (Dittrich et al., 1993; cf. Ruxton et al., 2018, Ch. 10). If it were not the case that pigeons developed a recognitional capacity to track the way wasps looked, there would be no point to the mimicking. Thus, the visual appearance of the wasp has explanatory priority (over any disjunctive characterisation of the appearance) when it comes to the development of both the pigeon's perceptual-recognitional capacity, and to the hoverflies mimicry.

A proponent of a disjunctive theory of expressive behaviour might avail themselves of this same line of reasoning. They could argue that genuinely expressive behaviour has an explanatory privilege when it comes to understanding the development of our epistemic capacities. As with the hoverfly, insincere assertions, acting, lying, and other deceitful behaviours fool us only because they are mimics of genuinely expressive behaviour. Furthermore, the fact that our epistemic capacities have developed to be sensitive to *genuine* expressions is precisely what is being exploited in cases of deception. If it were not the case that we had an epistemic capacity that was sensitive to genuine expressions, the liar or actor would not be able to fool us. But, if our epistemic capacities are individuated in terms of the epistemic grounds that are available only in cases of genuine expression, then that is the behaviour they are tracking. For this reason, it is plausible that whenever we are directly acquainted with genuinely expressive behaviour, we are in a position to know about another person's mind on the basis of fact-entailing evidence.

8 Conclusion

Philosophical discussions of other minds tend to focus on a single source of knowledge. There are good methodological reasons for this, but it vastly oversimplifies things. There is more than one way of acquiring knowledge of others' minds. Sometimes we learn about what other people think or feel, because they tell us. Other times, we can tell just by looking at them. Still other times, we might figure out what someone is feeling by imaginatively projecting ourselves into the person's situation.

When faced with this assortment of pathways to knowledge, we might begin to wonder whether any of them are fundamental, whether any of them are connected to what it is to have a mind like ours. This essay has argued that expressive behaviour holds a place of privilege when it comes to knowing others' minds. If this is right, it suggests that expressing our mental states may be a crucial part of what it is for us to be minded. That strikes me as an incredibly interesting idea worth further exploration, but it will have to wait for another occasion.²⁰

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Declarations

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