Evidence, testimony, and the problem of individualism – a response to Schmitt

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I am driving home from work one evening and hear a report on National Public Radio's 'All Things Considered' that an article in The New England Journal of Medicine reports having found a link between coffee drinking and heart disease. That story is of more than passing interest to me because I love coffee and my family tree is studded with heart disease. I believe what NPR says, reasoning that they usually do pretty responsible journalism, that this is not a story the reporter could lie or easily be mistaken about, and that NEJM is perhaps the premier journal in medicine and doesn't often publish shoddy work. So I believe that there is good reason to believe that there is such a link, and I make a mental note to try to cut down on my coffee consumption.

This is a simple, straight-forward example. It happens all the time. But it is not clear how we epistemologists are to analyze situations like this. Is my belief that there is good reason to believe that coffee drinking is implicated in heart disease a rational belief, based on good reasons? I submit that it is. Assume that it is.

But if my belief is a rational belief, it is not because I possess any evidence establishing a link between coffee and heart disease. Or that's what my intuitions lead me to want to say, at least. I'd be inclined to say that you just can't get evidence for something like that while you're driving home from work. You've got to do research to get evidence about coffee drinking and heart disease.¹

In fact, continuing to simply state my intuitions, I want to argue that the reporter for NPR and even the editors of NEJM do not have evidence for a link between coffee consumption and heart disease. The editor at NEJM only has tables allegedly reporting experimental results. The reviewers who refereed the article for NEJM may also have evidence for this link – if they are also involved in research on heart disease and/or coffee. But they do not have the evidence on which this study is based. You don't send articles to NEJM accompanied by bus loads of coffee drinkers with heart disease.

Now, all this may seem picky and trivial and overly fastidious about the concept 'evidence'. But 'evidence' is a critical concept, one of the key words in the epistemologist's lexicon. And after all, it is the coffee drinkers with heart disease that

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provide the rational basis for the whole edifice of beliefs. That's where the whole chain of appeals to authority makes contact with the real world. If there aren't really more coffee drinkers with heart disease out there somewhere, NEJM has been badly deceived. NPR has been misled, too, as have hundreds of listeners to 'All Things Considered' like me. Moreover, it may be especially important for social epistemologists to point out that not even the editors or reviewers of NEJM have the evidence to justify the study they publish. For we are thereby reminded of how very often the testimony of others provides the epistemic foundation for what we would call rational belief and even knowledge. We are all heavily involved in basing our beliefs on the evidence that others have for the truth of these beliefs.

What we have in this simple case is this: I have good reasons to believe that NPR has good reasons to believe that NEJM has good reasons to believe that the authors of the study have good reasons to believe that coffee drinking is implicated in heart disease. I argued in 'Epistemic Dependence' that the structure of rational appeals to authority in cases like this is captured by the following principle:

\((T)\) if \(B\) has good reasons for believing that \(A\) has good reasons for believing that \(p\), then \(B\) had good reasons for believing that \(p\).

Although we need to bear in mind that not all forms of rational appeal to authority are captured by this principle (since not all forms of authority rest on having good reasons for believing propositions), many appeals to experts rest on having good reasons for believing that \(p\). And many beliefs based upon the testimony of others who are not experts - e.g., witnesses of an event - are also captured by this principle. So, the principle captures the structure of very many common varieties of rational appeals to epistemic authorities. In any case, it is authority based on good reasons for believing propositions that both Schmitt and I are concerned to explicate. In particular, I am interested in an epistemological analysis of expertise and of the expert–lay person relationship.

Frederick Schmitt has accepted my principle, which he calls 'the principle of testimony', and he also wants to argue that appeals to the intellectual authority of experts will form a central component in an adequate epistemology. He is less enamored of my explanation of the principle and my attempt to draw out its epistemological implications. Schmitt argues that my account of the principle lapses back into epistemic individualism in key places and he proposes to shepherd me back onto the road to social epistemic interdependence.

Schmitt has the problem of all shepherds, however: the wandering sheep persist in the belief they are already headed in the right direction. So they keep straying. Thus, while I have to thank Schmitt for helping me clarify my views, we still disagree about where the true road to social epistemic interdependence lies. In particular,

1. I do not think the epistemological conscience of 'the stalwart individualist' can be pacified in the way Schmitt proposes;
2. I find his account flawed by a crucial ambiguity in his concepts of 'discharging testimony' and of 'nontestimonial evidence';
3. I think this ambiguity leads Schmitt to underestimate the role of undischarged testimony in the social division of epistemic labor.

In light of these arguments, I think we will be able to see the social character of belief and knowledge more clearly and also to envision a stronger case against the epistemological individualist.
Most of my disagreements with Schmitt can be focussed on the concept of evidence and the epistemic roles of various types of evidence. Evidently Schmitt’s intuitions about how we should use ‘evidence’ differ from mine. Schmitt would claim that I have evidence not only about the NPR report, but also about the article in *NEJM*, and even about the role of coffee in heart disease. To me that sounds odd. But Schmitt hastens to add that I have testimonial, rather than nontestimonial, evidence for all but the proposition that there was such a story of ‘All Things Considered’. Schmitt argues that if we say – as I did in ‘Epistemic dependence’ – that I have a kind of good reasons for believing that does not amount to evidence, we will succumb to the individualist’s or skeptic’s denial of the principle of testimony: ‘the stalwart individualist could easily retort that such a new kind of reason does not answer the skeptic’s call for reasons. What the skeptic demands is reasons in the sense of evidence for the truth of p, and this is precisely what a new kind of reason . . . would fail to deliver’. Thus Schmitt argues for a more latitudinarian concept of evidence (which I will accept for the purposes of this paper). At first glance it looks as if he wants to use ‘nontestimonial evidence’ for what I call ‘evidence’.

But if this is correct, Schmitt’s plan to rescue me from a stalwart individualist or skeptic seems to rest on a largely verbal maneuver. Simply redefining ‘evidence’ to include testimonial as well as nontestimonial reasons for belief surely will not mollify either the resolute individualist or the skeptic. For both can accept Schmitt’s redefinition but insist that testimonial evidence does not satisfy their call for reasons for belief. Both will now say that claims to know or to rationally believe must rest on nontestimonial evidence.

Yet would that claim be perverse or impossible to motivate: after all, it’s only actual coffee drinkers that confirm or disconfirm the putative link between coffee and heart disease. And my belief is three or four times removed from the actual coffee drinkers. Nor need the individualist grant Schmitt’s contention that medical researchers are ‘reliable’ instruments of observation in the way a good thermometer is. Researchers have beliefs, values, and interests and are thus, unlike thermometers, given to bias, rationalization, deception and self-deception about what are good reasons for believing p. Finally, the individualist could urge that her insistence on nontestimonial evidence does not imply a complete skepticism: rational belief and knowledge based on nontestimonial evidence remain. Granted, if we are skeptical about testimonial evidence, we will have fewer rational beliefs and less knowledge than we might have thought. But that may be a salutary consequence of the individualist position: we don’t know nearly as much as we often think we do.

The staunch individualist would thus insist that the most I can claim to know or rationally believe is that there was a report on NPR about an article linking coffee and heart disease. Unfortunately for me, however, the belief that there was such a report on NPR is not a belief I’m much interested in. I’m interested in whether my coffee addiction will get me in trouble and, consequently, in whether my newly formed belief that it increases my risk of heart disease is a rational belief.

Schmitt’s insistence that testimonial reasons be classified as evidence thus does not seen an adequate response to the individualist. Moreover, if we step back for a moment and consider what any account of rational appeals to the intellectual authority of experts is going to have to look like, it seems that the individualist cannot be defeated.

Any account of rational appeals to the intellectual authority of experts must tread a
fine line. On one hand, it must explain why the appeal is rational, in order to distinguish it from irrational or nonrational appeals to authority. Thus, B must have good reasons for believing $p$. If appealing to A gave B no reasons or poor reasons for believing $p$, her appeal would be irrational or nonrational. On the other hand, however, an account of a rational appeal to intellectual authority must also explain that authority, indeed *intellectual* authority, is involved. This means 1) That A’s reasons for believing $p$ must be better reasons than any that B could or would come up with (on her own) and 2. That B must acknowledge they are better. Otherwise, deference to the epistemic authority of an expert would be senseless or even impossible.

In sum, any account of B’s good reasons for believing that $p$ must make those reasons good enough to justify her belief that $p$, but not so good as to obviate the rational need for the appeal to authority and for deference to the judgment of that authority. Now, given this logic of a rational appeal to the authority of experts, it looks like there will *always* be a ground on which the individualist who wishes to deny the principle of testimony can take her stand. For B’s reasons must be and must be acknowledged to be inferior to A’s. It’s precisely that gap between B’s reasons and A’s that justifies the appeal to the judgment of A in the first place. And the resolute individualist can always exploit that gap, claiming that we should withhold the labels ‘rational belief’ and ‘knowledge’ until that gap is closed. Thus, no argument that the lay person, too, has a kind of evidence will answer the individualist. Indeed, it seems that she cannot be answered. For she bases her rejection of the principle of testimony on the gap between the reasons of the testifier and those of the receiver of testimony. And the view that there are rational appeals to intellectual authority requires acceptance of precisely this gap. Thus, if the individualist or skeptic is to be answered at all, it must be by arguments other than Schmitt’s.

II.

Before turning to see whether there can be an answer to the epistemological individualist, we need to note that there is an oversimplification in the preceding argument. I said that Schmitt seems to try to bail me out of trouble with stalwart individualists by a verbal maneuver. That is not quite right. And when we see why it’s not quite right, we will see that there is a critical ambiguity in Schmitt’s use of the distinction between testimonial and nontestimonial evidence. And this ambiguity of course implies a related ambiguity in the concept of discharging testimonial evidence, which is the process of replacing testimonial with nontestimonial reasons for believing. I can make sense of what Schmitt says only by assuming that he inadvertently slides from one side of these ambiguities to the other.

Recall the principle of testimony: B has good reasons to believe that A has good reasons to believe that $p$. In one sense of ‘discharging testimonial reasons’ B can be said to have discharged her testimonial reasons when she develops reasons for believing that $p$ which do not depend on A and A’s reasons. Having done that, B no longer depends on A’s testimony and in one sense, B can now be said to have nontestimonial evidence for believing $p$. But B may have escaped reliance upon the testimony of A in only a weak sense, by relying on the testimony of someone else. Thus, there is also a second, strong sense of ‘discharging’ in terms of which B cannot be said to have discharged her testimonial evidence until she no longer relies on *anyone* else’s reasons to justify her belief that $p$.

In this strong sense, B cannot discharge her testimonial evidence until she has
sufficient independent reasons for believing \( p \). This strong sense of 'discharge' and of 'nontestimonial evidence' seem the more important to epistemology. Clearly, only the strong senses of both concepts would satisfy the epistemological individualist or the skeptic. For only the nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense establishes a sufficient link between \( B \)'s beliefs and the real world.

There are passages that suggest that Schmitt is, indeed, talking about the strong sense of both 'discharge' and 'nontestimonial evidence'. For example, when considering one of my arguments about the use of 'evidence' Schmitt says that it 'has a ring of plausibility which derives from the idea that experts are epistemically obligated to consider evidence for \( p \) directly and not to weigh in the opinions of other experts. . . . I believe this is true. . . . Schmitt also says that experts become experts 'by acquiring nontestimonial reasons for beliefs on the topic of expertise' and that 'it is their business to add nontestimonial reasons in the social network of testimonial processes'. These statements, taken together, suggest that the 'nontestimonial reasons' which experts gather must not 'weigh in' – much less depend upon – the opinions of other experts. This would lead one to believe that Schmitt is speaking of 'discharging testimonial reasons' in the second, stronger sense I have distinguished.

But Schmitt also talks about the engineer reading journal articles or a person going to the library to check up on the architectural claims of a traveler to Rome as 'discharging testimonial evidence'. In this context, Schmitt must be referring to the weak sense of 'discharging testimonial evidence'. For beliefs derived from reading engineering journals or books about Roman architecture are obviously no more than belief based on testimony. When reading journals or books we either acquire new testimonial reasons where we had none (or fewer) before, or we check our reliance upon the testimony of \( A \) against the testimony of someone else. To get nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense about engineering principles one has to go into the lab and do experiments. And your evidence about Roman architecture is all testimonial (in the strong sense) until you've actually been to Rome. Schmitt's journal-reading engineer fits the principle of testimony perfectly: this engineer has good reasons to believe that the authors of the articles on the journal have good reasons to believe that \( p \).

Personally, I would urge that we resolve the ambiguity in favor of the strong sense of 'discharge' and 'nontestimonial evidence'. Thus, I want to argue that as long as \( B \)'s belief that \( p \) is logically dependent – dependent for its epistemic justification – on anyone else's reasons, we ought to count \( B \)'s belief as based (at least in part) on testimonial evidence. 'Nontestimonial evidence' then becomes synonymous with the way I think we should use 'evidence'.

Thus, if Schmitt intends the strong sense of 'discharge' and 'nontestimonial evidence', then his attempt to rescue me from the epistemological individualist or skeptic is truly nothing more than a verbal maneuver. And Schmitt needs this strong sense, for the weaker sense of 'discharge' and the more inclusive sense of 'nontestimonial evidence' will not satisfy either the individualist or the skeptic. Because the dependence of receiver of testimony on some testifier or other then remains, even after testimonial reasons have been discharged.

III.

The problems go even deeper. They are bound to, since these concepts – evidence, nontestimonial evidence, and discharging testimony – are such key concepts in
epistemology. Because Schmitt does not distinguish the strong and weak senses of nontestimonial evidence and also because he does not consider, except 'obliquely', the role of undischarged testimony within the scientific and scholarly pursuits of knowledge, he misses the full epistemological force of the cognitive division of labor. And also the true road to social epistemic interdependence. If we now turn to a closer look at experts and what makes them expert, we can gain a clearer vision of the social character of knowledge and a stronger argument against the epistemological individualist.

There are at least two kinds of experts. When Schmitt talks about experts, he seems to have researchers in mind, for, in the division of epistemic labor, it is the task of researchers to 'add nontestimonial reasons in the social network of testimonial processes' and perhaps also to 'consider evidence for \( p \) directly and not to weigh in the opinions of other experts'.

But expert testifiers need not be researchers. Most engineers or practising physicians, for example, do not even try to add new nontestimonial evidence to their disciplines. Moreover, the knowledge they acquire in order to become physicians or engineers is not primarily nontestimonial in the strong sense—they get their knowledge from books and journals and other practitioners. Finally, they are under no obligation to discharge testimonial evidence in the strong sense, not even in their fields of expertise. They do, however, need to be able to critically evaluate books and articles in their fields, so they must discharge testimony in the weak sense. In sum, this kind of expert practice or applies existing knowledge, rather than testing, extending, or refining it.

But it is true of researchers (if not of experts in general) that they are researchers by virtue of 'acquiring nontestimonial reasons for beliefs on the topic of expertise'. It is also true of researchers that 'it is their business to add nontestimonial reasons in the social network of testimonial processes'. It is involvement in the process of gathering new strong nontestimonial evidence that makes someone a researcher. Thus, although practitioners need to discharge testimony only in the weak sense, researchers can be researchers only by gathering strong nontestimonial evidence. In what follows, I will assume that when Schmitt talks about 'nontestimonial evidence' and 'discharging testimony' in the contexts of researchers (in their fields), he has the strong sense of both these concepts in mind.

It is, of course, precisely their involvement in the process of gathering new strong nontestimonial evidence that makes researchers the more epistemologically interesting kind of experts. Because they are involved in gathering the strongest kind of evidence for the truth of \( p \), they are the paradigm case of knowers. Moreover, when we appeal to the authority of other experts, we expect that their beliefs are ultimately grounded in the strong nontestimonial evidence that researchers have and gather. The reviewers and editors at \( NEJM \), the reporter at \( NPR \) and I have good reasons to believe that coffee is implicated in heart disease, because the researchers have strong nontestimonial evidence for that belief. Everybody's epistemic tots are cashed out (if at all) by the strong nontestimonial evidence that researchers have and gather.

Let us, then, focus our discussion of experts on researchers and examine the role of testimony and of justification for believing in their work. Two features of researchers must be acknowledged and accounted for. 1. Researchers gather nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense, and 2. this kind of evidence is the best evidence for the truth of \( p \). From these two propositions, one is tempted—and epistemologists have been tempted—to conclude two things. 1. The best evidence for the truth of \( p \) is also the best reason for believing \( p \) and so there will always be an epistemic gap between the
researcher who has this strong nontestimonial evidence and anyone to whom she testifies. Those who are not dependent on the testimony of anyone else for the justification of their beliefs will always be in better epistemological shape (2). Everyone has an epistemic obligation to discharge testimony (i.e., to get the best evidence, strong nontestimonial evidence) whenever she can do so. Schmitt calls this second conclusion the 'Independence Principle'.

We have already recognized the gap between the justification of a testifier and that of anyone to whom she testifies as an old friend of the epistemological individualist. The Independence Principle is her friend, as well. Fortunately, it is a mistake – a mistake which the epistemological individualist characteristically makes – to believe that these two conclusions follow from the fact that strong nontestimonial evidence is the best evidence for the truth of p.

Schmitt both qualifies and restricts the Independence Principle. He then attacks it (as any good social epistemologist should). But the modifications he makes and the way he attacks the principle indicate that Schmitt has been seduced by some features of epistemological individualism.

Schmitt first qualifies the Independence Principle by requiring that we discharge testimony only when 'such a discharge would not entail a significant loss of justification (for either the given belief or other beliefs)'. The rationale for such a qualification seems temptingly obvious: discharging would be epistemologically pointless, even counter-productive, if it left the discharger with a set of less justified beliefs than she had before discharging. Thus, Schmitt affirms that we all have 'an obligation to retain something close to the amount of justification we already have' and argues that the obligation to independence must be limited in order to be 'balanced' with this obligation. But as we shall see, the view that we must not tolerate a loss of justification when discharging testimony is mistaken. And if accepted, it would stifle research.

Schmitt also restricts the applicability of the Independence Principle to researchers within their fields of expertise. At least, I believe Schmitt would hold that the Independence Principle is appropriate for researchers within their areas of specialization. Schmitt argues that lay persons can be under no general obligation to discharge testimony [in the strong sense], for 'that would require far more cognitive energy and skill than we have at our disposal'. Moreover, he clearly recognizes that the division of cognitive labor means that experts' 'obligations as experts may force them generally to abstain from discharging testimonial reasons for beliefs in areas outside their expertise'. But Schmitt seems to think that the division of cognitive labor occurs only between areas of expertise, not also within them. Consequently, although he restricts the Independence Principle to researchers within their fields of expertise, he seems to accept it as a valid principle for researchers in their fields of specialization.

If this is indeed Schmitt's view, he is, I believe, mistaken in important ways. In any case, the principal objection to the notion that researchers should discharge testimony wherever possible (without loss of justification) is not, as Schmitt would have us believe, that it would lead researchers to try to discharge outside of their disciplines and hence to failures to mind their cognitive business. The really telling objection to the Independence Principle is that researchers must not attempt to discharge most testimony within their disciplines or they will destroy their ability to conduct their cognitive business. Schmitt argues that the Independence Principle is not appropriate for experts qua nonexpert. But it is much more important that it is not appropriate for experts qua knower. And thus not for knowers qua knower.
As long as we do not question the assumption that it is better to have strong nontestimonial evidence, we will focus on discharging testimony in the strong sense, at least for researchers in their areas of expertise. For discharging will then be seen simply as getting the best reasons for believing. And researchers surely are charged with the epistemic mission of gathering and having the best reasons for believing. Some version of the Independence Principle is then in the offing, at least for researchers. But I believe that it is epistemologically regressive to focus, as Schmitt does, on discharging when discussing of the role of testimony in expertise. It gives the epistemological individualist too much, and it reaffirms the gap through which individualists and skeptics attack social epistemologists.

Now, this gap can be definitely closed only by insisting that for any given individual, researchers as well as practitioner or lay person, beliefs that depend on testimonial evidence are in no way epistemically inferior to beliefs that do not—this despite the fact that nontestimonial evidence is the best evidence for the truth of \( p \). In fact, I will argue that testimonial evidence for \( p \) can be epistemologically better than even the best strong nontestimonial evidence that anyone can have. Even if she is an expert and \( p \) falls within her field of expertise. It is this observation that exposes the Achilles’ heel of the individualist and of any other skeptic about the principle of testimony.

I can see three arguments of the superiority of belief based, in part at least, on testimony. The first is this. Researchers are, sometimes, knowers. But research at the research front is possible in most disciplines only on the basis of undischarged testimony (in the strong sense). It would be impossible for anyone to get to the research front in physics, medicine, chemistry, engineering, or psychology if she insisted on strong nontestimonial evidence for beliefs in her field. So, the process of gathering the best evidence depends on undischarged testimonial reasons for believing.

There is a second reason why belief based partly on testimony is superior to belief based completely on nontestimonial evidence. The possibility that the result of an investigation is due to errors or biases of the investigator is greatly reduced if the results can be replicated. Thus, a researcher who knows that her results have been reproduced by someone else has better reasons for believing \( p \) than she would have had she reproduced her own results—even though those reasons are now based partly on undischarged testimony.

A third argument for the superiority of belief based partly on testimony was explored in my ‘Epistemic dependence’ paper. I discussed there an example of an article reporting experimental results in particle physics. The article had 99 authors. The experiment could have been done with fewer investigators, but not a lot fewer. It is simply too complex (as well as requiring far too many person/years) to be conducted by any one laboratory or university, to say nothing of one individual. The process of adding nontestimonial evidence increasingly requires the cooperation of many researchers, each of whom must rely on the undischarged testimony of other members of the team if the experiment is to be conducted at all. Thus, not only would individuals be unable to get to or stay at the research front if they felt obligated to discharge testimony, but the community would be deprived of new nontestimonial reasons since research would have to be simple enough to be carried out by one person. Because these 99 authors relied on each other, we now have a better measure of the life of a charm particle—the goal of their research—than by any that could be produced by an individual researcher.

Our epistemological account of research should not, then, focus simply on discharging. For, most modern research is possible only on the basis of undischarged
testimony or is epistemically better when it rests on undischarged testimony than it could be if it did not.

There is a second paradoxical feature of researchers which we must now briefly examine: they do not gain justification for their beliefs through their research. In fact, researchers standardly suffer a net loss of justification due to their research. A loss of justification for other beliefs of the individual discharger will always result from an attempt to discharge testimony (in the strong sense) for one belief: such discharging takes time and energy that could be spent keeping up with the new testimonial evidence in one’s field or refreshing one’s memory of once familiar testimonial evidence. Take, for example, the successful researcher – i.e., the one who produces significant new strong nontestimonial evidence. She generally must be very narrowly specialized and focused. As a result, she has much less time for reading widely in her field. Thus she – despite her success at producing new nontestimonial evidence – standardly suffers a net loss of justification for beliefs in her field, precisely because of her research. She would have had more justification for her beliefs had she been an avid testimony-gatherer instead. Of course, the discipline grows and others gain justification through her research efforts. But that is another matter . . . to which we shall return.14

Schmitt believes that we all have ‘an obligation to retain something close to the amount of justification we already have’ for our beliefs. But we have no such obligation. The belief that we do only shows the seductive power of the individualist’s point of view. Moreover, the view that we should discharge testimony only when ‘such a discharge would not entail a significant loss of justification (for either the given belief or other beliefs)” (p. 13) is also dangerous. If accepted, it would stifle research: in healthy, active disciplines, a loss of justification will almost always be involved in an attempt to discharge testimony.

Examination of researchers and the way they do their research thus yields two very important conclusions.

1. Reasons for believing p based partly on testimony can be epistemologically superior to even the best strong nontestimonial evidence for p that anyone, even a researcher in her field of expertise, can have.

2. Researchers standardly suffer a net loss of justification for their beliefs about their field through their search for new strong nontestimonial evidence, even if that search is successful.

And both of these conclusions hold despite the fact that strong nontestimonial evidence is the best evidence for the truth of p.

IV.

What, then, are we epistemologists to make of all this? On the one hand, nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense is required to ultimately justify beliefs in most areas of human knowledge. But, on the other, individuals working in those areas must not seek nontestimonial evidence for most of their beliefs. For doing so would preclude them from being researchers, reduce the justification they have for their own beliefs, and diminish the justification supporting the beliefs of the scientific or scholarly community.

The epistemological individualist who would insist that anyone (even a researcher in her own area of specialization) attempt to base her beliefs on strong nontestimonial evidence is, I think, simply stuck at this point. Without belief based on undischarged
testimony, there can be no cooperative inquiry. The individualist can allow no cooperative methodology. Hence, as soon as a discipline reaches the point at which so much is known that no individual can know all of it on the basis of strong nontestimonial evidence, the epistemological individualist must simply conclude that no more can be known in that field. Science and scholarship may proceed by simply ignoring the individualist, but she will refuse to call the results ‘knowledge’ or even ‘rational belief’. The epistemological individualist must hold either that the more strong nontestimonial evidence there is in a culture, the fewer justified beliefs there are in that culture . . . or that the justified beliefs can be justified only by ignoring most of the evidence. The individualism that was to guarantee that everyone’s beliefs make contact with reality ends up by prohibiting everyone from gathering or even considering most of the best evidence about that reality.

Instead, I believe that we need to distinguish an impersonal from a personal sense of evidence. ‘Impersonal evidence’ is evidence possessed by the community of experts; ‘personal evidence’ is that possessed by an individual member of the community. In terms of this distinction, it is epistemically of the first importance that the entire edifice of knowledge and beliefs be supported at as many points as possible by nontestimonial evidence in the strong, impersonal sense. That is what distinguishes an epistemologically justified tradition or community (say, physics or medicine) from one that is fraudulent, mistaken, or obsolete (say, phrenology or alchemy). And impersonal evidence must have once been also personal evidence, possessed by at least one member of the tradition.

But as the tradition develops and its accomplishments are passed down by one generation testifying to another, there will soon be evidence that is no longer possessed in nontestimonial form by any living member of the community. Nor can present members of the community escape essential reliance both on the past accomplishments of the tradition and on each other if they are to contribute to the tradition or even to master it. Personal evidence must then be largely testimonial in nature or the tradition cannot grow or even survive. For all individuals working within well-developed epistemic traditions, beliefs based largely on testimonial evidence will be better than those based entirely on nontestimonial evidence. Once this point is reached, only the community can have the strong nontestimonial evidence necessary to justify the beliefs and efforts of the individuals working within the community.

Like other communities, an epistemic community grows and flourishes through cooperation: the community gains maximum justification for beliefs in its field (and thus members of that community achieve maximally justified beliefs) only if individuals in that community aim to contribute to the community’s justification for its beliefs, rather than attempting to maximise justification for their own beliefs. The individualist’s strategy backfires: if each attempts to maximise justification for her own beliefs, all suffer loss of justification for their beliefs. Except for the epistemic free riders (i.e., testimony gatherers) who are parasitic on a community.

This is, of course, what the epistemological individualist misses. The individualist recognizes the superiority of strong nontestimonial evidence and bases her position on that superiority. But because she does not see that the community can have the nontestimonial evidence necessary to justify a given expert’s beliefs, she is forced to maintain that each individual must possess the nontestimonial evidence that supports those of her beliefs that can be called rational or that can qualify as knowledge. Taken seriously, the individualist position would simply destroy all well-developed epistemic traditions.
Beliefs, then, must be grounded in strong nontestimonial evidence. However, it is crucial that individuals not try to obtain most of this evidence in any but a testimonial form. Nor is this conclusion the result of an accidental feature of human knowledge necessitated by human failings and limitations. I'll leave it to theologians to debate whether an infinite mind, with infinite ability to discharge testimony and with all the time in the world, would be in better epistemological shape. But reliance upon undischarged testimony is an epistemic strength for any group of finite inquirers. In epistemology, as in theology, believing that you are self-reliant or attempting to be self-reliant is a sin: for finite beings, epistemic interdependence is epistemologically better than epistemic independence. Because the epistemological individualist requires each to stand on her own epistemic feet, her position would preclude anyone from standing on the shoulders of giants. And then no one could see very much, very far, or very clearly.

Notes and References

1. This is perhaps a slight overstatement. Perhaps we should say that physicians can have 'anecdotal evidence' for a link between coffee and heart disease. Maybe we should even say that I have a few shreds of evidence when I remember that all the folks in my family who dropped dead of heart disease were coffee drinkers. But what evidence I can be said to have is surely far too scant to provide a warrant for a rational belief that there is such a link. And I'd also say that the evidence I have is not derived from listening to the radio. You get evidence that there was a report on the wire by listening to the radio, but you can't get evidence that there is a link between coffee and heart disease by just listening to the radio.


3. This principle may not even capture the structure of all rational appeals to the authority of experts. For some forms of expertise—wine tasters, cotton graders, and medical diagnosticians—may rest on a discernment or judgment not explicable in terms of 'reasons for believing p'. I think we need an account of various types of epistemic authority and this account will then need to be integrated into the general theory of authority (which political and social philosophers have been working on for millennia).


5. In fact, Schmitt may very well be correct that the individualist can make room for some testimony by availing herself of Hume's strategy for justifying belief based on testimony. 'His strategy was to require nontestimonial reasons for the belief that A has good reasons for believing p. On his account of justificiation on testimony, B is justified in believing p when he has inductive reasons for believing p, consisting of the basis: if A believes q, then q, for various propositions q concerning the topic of p. At one point in 'Epistemic dependence' I said that B has evidence - not evidence for the truth of p, but evidence for the truth of a different proposition: 'A has good reasons to believe that p'. Schmitt is quite right: that's a mistake. I should have said that there are some cases in which B has evidence that A has good reasons, but many in which she does not. The latter cases are the more interesting ones and, in any case, Schmitt is clearly right that the Humean strategy is 'generally unavailable'. So although the Humean strategy may make room for some testimony within the individualist position, the individualist remains committed to denying the principle of testimony for all cases that can't be seen in terms of that strategy.

6. Schmitt is, of course, no skeptic about the principle of testimony. So he argues that when the testifier is a 'reliable source', her testimony will establish a sufficient link between B's beliefs and the world. Then, if the individualist will accept testimony that can pass Hume's test (cf. note 5 above), she will be committed to allowing some testimonial evidence to establish a sufficient link between B's beliefs and the world. But even so, the individualist will still insist on nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense - strong nontestimonial evidence that the source is reliable. Weak nontestimonial evidence that the source is reliable does not, she will insist, establish a sufficient link between B's belief and the world.

7. It is only in a few very special cases—disciplines like philosophy, mathematics, perhaps literary criticism—that one can get nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense from a journal. And the special case of philosophy may have misled Schmitt. In philosophy, the argument is the whole thing. So if you read a philosophy journal and understand the argument as well as the author does, you have more than nontestimonial evidence. You have nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense: your epistemic position is independent upon the author's (though the historical dependence remains, of course). But in
most disciplines—medicine, science, engineering, architecture, etc.—the argument in the journal rests on data and you have to have data to convert your testimonial to nontestimonial evidence in the strong sense.

8. Because these concepts are so basic, the problems will also be broader. I would argue that Schmitt’s discussion of the Independence Principle of autonomy, and of the lay person’s epistemic resources for criticizing the opinions of the experts all suffer from the ambiguity in the concepts of nontestimonial evidence and discharging testimony. But I cannot make these arguments here.

9. One could, of course, say that the principles of engineering or medicine receive additional nontestimonial confirmation in the strong sense every time a building doesn’t fall down or a patient recovers. I wouldn’t want to deny that. But the aim of practicing engineers and physicians—reasons of safety and ethics—is to practice within the well-established principles of the discipline. Precisely for this reason, the nontestimonial evidence of the practitioner does not usually constitute a test of the principles that is interesting for the community. Physicians sometimes publish ‘case reports’, but imagine an engineer trying to publish an article announcing that the building he’d just designed did not fall down.

10. I cannot enter into the issues here, but it is important to note that the process of discharging testimony even in the weak sense (without loss of justification) is not simple matter. It usually requires considerable intellect, training, and skill even to assess the literature. Scientific and scholarly communities divide over issues of approach, methodology, reliability, impact, and implications of work in the field. Schmitt evidently believes that when the community of experts is divided over such issues, laypersons can be good at identifying the more reliable sources and thus good at discharging, at least in the weak sense. In fact, he thinks they can be better at this assessment than ‘the less reliable experts’ in the field. I find that simply unbelievable. On the contrary, I think a lay person will very often face the difficulty of being completely unable to tell when her attempt to discharge testimony in the weak sense involves a loss of justification (due to unwitting reliance upon less reliable sources) and when it does not. The ability to competently evaluate putative contributions to a field is given, I believe, only to those who study the field. And thus the layperson should normally leave the business of discharging testimony even in the weak sense to an expert.

11. To cast the Independence Principle in terms of permissibility— it is ‘rationally permissible to discharge epistemic dependence on testimony in any given case in which . . . doing so does not entail significant loss of justification’—is to weaken the principle so much that it ceases to be epistemologically interesting. Having fulfilled one’s epistemic obligations and achieved epistemic virtue, one is free to make love, eat clam linguini, go bowling, or discharge epistemic dependence on testimony. As if if one’s hobby were real virtue.

12. Of course, the gap between testifier and receiver of testimony is closed in one sense, in another it remains. It must remain in order for the appeal to the authority of the testifier to be rational. A still has better reasons for believing A than any B would/could come up with on her own. But testimonial evidence is not epistemically inferior because, by incorporating the testimony of A (and A and D, etc.) into her reasons for believing B, B has better reasons for believing B than A. B can incorporate the reasons of others. B will not, of course, normally have better reasons than A because A, too, will have incorporated the testimony of C, D, etc. If A is an expert and B is not, A will also be better than B at evaluating and incorporating the testimony of C, D, etc.

13. For most researchers most of the time, testimonial evidence is considered quite sufficient. They do not generally attempt to discharge testimonial reasons; they build on those reasons. And an epistemic obligation to ‘discharge testimony in the broadest range of cases [in the field] in which such a discharge would not entail a significant loss of justification’ would be disastrous. For it would require everyone within the field to discharge the testimony that is easiest to discharge, so as to obtain nontestimonial evidence in the broadest range of cases. No. part of the act and skill of doing significant research is the ability to discern which beliefs are good candidates for discharging and which are bad candidates for discharging. Moreover, even in the case of a belief that is an excellent candidate for discharging, it’s one thing to say that everyone should discharge testimony for it, but it’s an entirely different thing to say that everyone (in the field) should do so. The latter imperative would bring the whole discipline to a grinding halt over an obsession with discharging that one belief.

14. The issue about whether we want our college and university teachers to be actively engaged in the kind of research that will lead to publications can be seen as an issue about what kind of experts we want in our classrooms. It’s an issue of what kind of research we want our teachers to do. Those who are actively engaged in discharging testimony in the strong sense—i.e., in the kind of research that could lead to publications—will stand ready to discharge testimony against most of the beliefs they hold—and teach—than avoid testimony gathering. Even in their own disciplines. The students of such a researcher suffer from her relative lack of justification. But the discipline benefits from new beliefs or new justification and, consequently, other researchers and other students benefit.

15. Schmitt is thus absolutely correct in believing that I want an impersonal notion of evidence and of ‘evidence counting against other evidence’. I would have thought that logic, statistics, probability theory, etc., would be part of an impersonal notion of evidence counting against other evidence. But I am in no position to make out this impersonal notion of evidence. I also obviously need a definition of
'community of experts'. I don't have one of those, either. I would try not to define the community in kuhnian fashion, as constituted by allegiance to a paradigm. Rather, the community is constituted, in part by the process of examining different paradigms. That's what I'd like to say. I don't know whether that view could be pulled off, through.