

Reid on Cartesianism with Regard to Testimony:  
A Non-Reductionist Reappraisal

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In the chapter entitled “Of Social Operations of the Mind” in Essay I of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Thomas Reid laments that the division of the operations of our mind into *social* and *solitary* operations has been overlooked by those writers before him who concerned themselves with the intellectual powers. Reid defines the social operations as those that “necessarily suppose an intercourse with some other intelligent being,” (214)<sup>1</sup> and includes among them “when [one] asks information, or receives it; when [one] bears testimony, or receives the testimony of another [...]” (214) All of the social operations are, as he notes, irreducible in terms of the actions of solitary epistemic agents. That is, social operations, for Reid, “are neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning, nor are they any combination of these operations.” (214)

In this manner, Reid defines his own position with respect to the status of testimony in opposition to reduction, and distinguishes himself from other philosophers who attempt to explain testimony away in terms of other intellectual powers. Reid repeats his assertion that “[t]estimony is neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning,” and continues, “[... Such] acts of mind are perfectly understood by every man of common understanding; but, when

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Reid’s work are from the sixth edition of Sir William Hamilton’s *The Works of Thomas Reid* (Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, 1868).

philosophers attempt to bring them within the pale of their divisions, by analysing them, they find inexplicable mysteries, and even contradictions, in them.” (214) In contrast to such philosophers, Reid holds that the social intellectual powers, and among them testimony, “are original parts of our constitution, [whose ...] exertions [... are] no less natural than the exertions of those powers that are solitary and selfish.” (214)

In this paper I will contrast Reid’s position, according to which testimony is a basic – and irreducible – source of knowledge and justification, with a position that I have termed Cartesianism (for reasons which should become clear), according to which testimony is only barely to be tolerated as a source of belief and can only be justified by an inductive inference supporting the reliability of its source. In the first section, I sketch the Cartesian position, giving particular emphasis to Hume’s discussion of testimony. In the second and third sections, I discuss Reid’s responses to the issues raised by a consideration of the Cartesian position on testimony, and note ways in which Reid’s positions may enrich the present debate between reductionists and non-reductionists with regard to testimony.

## I. Cartesianism with Respect to Testimony

### 1. Descartes and Locke

As Reid notes, Descartes “[builds his system of the human understanding] upon the foundation of conscious thought” and derives from this basic foundation “his system of the material world and attempts to account from it all phaenomena.” (206) Descartes’ methodological solipsism leads him to be highly suspicious of beliefs gained upon the authority of others. Thus, in his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes reports that he

thought that book-learning [...] gradually forms and multiplies itself on the basis of the opinions of different persons and is therefore not as close to the truth as the simple reasonings which a man of good sense quite

naturally engages in with regard to the things which are before him [...]. [H]ence [he] thought it virtually impossible that our judgments should be as pure and well-grounded as they would have been if we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by it alone.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar vein, and even more dramatically, Locke writes:

I hope it will not be thought arrogance to say, that perhaps we should make greater progress in the discovery of [...] knowledge if we sought it [...] in the consideration of things themselves, and made use rather of our own thoughts than other men's to find it: for, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes as to know by other men's understanding [...]. The floating of other men's opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was science is in us but opiniatrey."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most detailed Cartesian account of testimony, however, may be found in Section X, Part I, of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>4</sup> I now turn to a detailed discussion of Hume's argument in the following section.

## 2. Hume's Argument Against Testimony

Hume's argument concerning testimony is meant to follow directly from his observations concerning the reasonableness of inductive inference with regard to cause and effect. He begins his discussion of testimony by noting that he wishes "[t]o apply these principles

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<sup>2</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1903), p. 21; translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I. iv. 24.

<sup>4</sup> All page numbers from the *Enquiry* are from David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[regarding probable inductive inferences] to a particular instance; [i.e., ...] the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators.” (E, 111)

According to Hume, the probability of a particular inductive inference “If a is F, then b will be G” is the ratio of the number of instances in which a’s being F was followed by b’s being G to the number of instances in which a’s being F was followed by b’s being not-G. Applied to testimony, Hume’s principle suggests that whenever an F-testifier (e.g., a corroborated, skilled, or consistent testifier<sup>5</sup>) says that  $p$ , we can assume that  $p$  with an assurance equal to the ratio of the number of times in the past in which F-testifiers testified truly to the number of times in the past in which that to which F-testifiers testified was not true. Thus, Hume argues that, “as the evidence, derived from witnesses and human testimony, is founded on past experience, so it varies with the experience, and is regarded either as a *proof* or a *probability*, according as the conjunction between any particular kind of report and any kind of object has been found to be constant or variable.” (E, 112)

According to Hume, then, we ought always to assess testimonial evidence according to the following basic inferential schema:

- (1) Testifier T says that  $p$ ;
  - (2) if a G-testifier says that  $p$ , then  $p$ ;
  - (3) T is a G-testifier;
- therefore, (4)  $p$ ,
- where both premise (2) and (3) are inductively derived from prior experience. For as we saw, Hume believes that our prior experiences with the testimony of G-testifiers probabilifies or proves the claim “If

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<sup>5</sup>three of Locke’s criteria for the reliability of witnesses. See *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.iv.4.

a G-testifier says that  $p$ , then  $p$ ". Similarly, Hume ought to hold<sup>6</sup> that only my prior experience with a particular testifier T can probabilify or prove the claim "T is a G-testifier". With regard to the experiential basis of the justification of testimony generally, Hume notes that "[t]here are a number of circumstances to be taken into consideration in all judgments of this kind; and the ultimate standard ... is always derived from experience and observation. Where this experience is not entirely uniform on any side, it is attended with an unavoidable contrariety in our judgments, and with the same opposition and mutual destruction of argument as in every other kind of evidence." (*E*, 112)

Thus, Hume's *a priori* considerations with regard to testimony lead him to the following conclusions: (1) the "wise man" has confidence in testimony only insofar as his experience supports such confidence; and (2) the process by which the "wise man" justifies his confidence in the reliability of any particular instance of testimony is through inductive inference.

## II. Reid on the Experiential Support of Testimony

In this section and the next, I will use Reid's analysis of testimony to examine the two conclusions concerning testimony derived in our discussion of Hume above. I will first discuss conclusion (1), regarding the necessary connection between experiential support of testimony and our confidence in testimony, and will leave a discussion of conclusion (2), regarding the necessity of *inductively inferential* support for testimony, for section III.

### 1. Experience *is* not a Necessary Condition for Trust in Testimony

In his *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, Reid provides the basis for a strong argument against Hume's claim that "wise men" require

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<sup>6</sup>He writes, e.g., that "[a] man ... *noted* for falsehood and villany [] has no manner of authority with us" (*E*, 112; my italics).

experiential support for the reliability of testimony, viz., that Hume's principle quite simply misrepresents the facts. For certainly the sort of individualistic stance that Hume recommends to the "wise man" is a stance which can only be assumed *after* the "wise man" has a secure position in a community of knowers, a position that he can only attain by assuming an initially trusting attitude toward the reports of others. "Such distrust and incredulity" as is involved in following Hume's principle, Reid notes,

would deprive us of the greatest benefits of society [...]. Children, on this supposition, would be absolutely incredulous, and, therefore, absolutely incapable of instruction[;] those who had little knowledge of human life [...] would be in the next degree incredulous; and the most credulous men would be those of greatest experience, and of the deepest penetration; because, in many cases they would be able to find good reasons for believing testimony, which the weak and ignorant could not discover. (197)

Thus, Reid's comments imply not merely that Hume fails to represent the facts correctly, but that Hume actually gets the facts *backward*. Were Hume's principle correct, as Reid notes in the passage quoted above, one's credulity would increase as one becomes older. The reverse, however, is the case. As Reid argues, "the most superficial view of human life shews, that [...] a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us [...] is unlimited in children, until they meet with instances of deceit and falsehood; and [this disposition] retains a very considerable degree of strength through life." (196)

It could be argued, however, that Hume's goal in his discussion of testimony is not to describe the actual progression of epistemic agents from trust to distrust, but rather to suggest an epistemic principle by which to separate those cases of testimony that are to be believed from those that are to be doubted. Indeed, in his response to similar criticisms made by George Campbell, a

contemporary of Reid's and a participant in the philosophical society in Aberdeen that included among its participants Reid, Gregory, Beattie and Gerard, Hume contends in a letter to Blair that he "would desire [Campbell] to consider whether the medium by which we reason concerning human testimony be different from that which leads us to draw inferences concerning other human actions ... [o]r why is it different? I suppose we conclude an honest man will not lie to us, in the same manner as we conclude that he will not cheat us. As to the youthful propensity to believe, which is *corrected* by experience; it seems obvious, that children adopt *blindfold* all ... opinions ...; *nor is this more strange, than that a hammer should make an impression on clay.*" (Greig,<sup>7</sup> I:349; my italics)

In his letter to Blair, Hume is arguing that his principle with regard to testimony is an *epistemic* principle, a principle meant to aid in reasoning well. This is one of the reasons why Hume directed his comments in the *Enquiry*, Section X, to "wise men". It is also the reason why Hume speaks of the "youthful propensity to believe" being "*corrected* by experience". The indiscriminately trusting believer in the testimony of others is not acting soundly (in an *epistemic* sense), and is in need of *correction*. But perhaps the most striking part of the letter to Blair is Hume's comparison of a child's trusting acceptance of the testimony of others with the propensity of clay to receive the impression of a hammer which strikes it. For it seems here that Hume is contrasting the (merely causal?) transmission of belief from adult to child with the (epistemically more sound) transmission of belief from a G-testifier to a "wise man" who knows the testifier in question to be a G-testifier, and who furthermore knows that G-testifiers are apt only to make assertions which turn out to be true.

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<sup>7</sup>J.Y.T. Greig, Ed. *Letters of David Hume*. (Oxford: The University Press, 1932).

Given this interpretation of Hume's comments on testimony, according to which therequirement that one reassure oneself of the reliability of testimony before lending one's credence to it is an *epistemic* requirement, Reid's observations concerning our *actual practices* with regard to the acceptance of testimonial evidence is not directly relevant. In order to address Hume's arguments, read epistemically, Reid would not merely to demonstrate that experiential support *is not* a condition for trust in testimony, but also that it *need not* be a condition. That is, Reid would have to deny that good epistemic agents have a *duty* to confirm evidentially their testimonially-derived beliefs.

## 2. Experience *Need Not Be* a Necessary Condition for Trust in Testimony

Although Reid does not directly address the issues raised by Hume in his letter to Blair, Campbell offers a response in his *Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh, 1763) that is very strongly Reidian in spirit. Campbell's reply is based on the conviction that Hume's position on testimony skews the perspective from which an evaluation of testimony ought to take place. Campbell (and Reid) might agree with Hume that "we frequently hesitate concerning the reports of others [..., that we] entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations." (*E*, 112-3) Hume, however, is committed to the much stronger position that even in those cases in which we are certain about the testimony of others, the reason why we are certain is (or ought to be) that our experience allows us to be. It is this stronger position that Campbell denies.

Campbell refuses to grant Hume that the basic question with regard to the status of testimony has been resolved, namely "[w]hether *the influence of testimony on belief be original or derived?*", maintaining

that this question “is of the greatest importance.” Campbell argues that

the difference between [himself and Hume] is by no means so inconsiderable, as to a careless view it may appear. According to [Hume’s] philosophy, the **presumption is against testimony**, or (which amounts to the same thing) **there is not the smallest presumption in its favour, till properly supported by experience**. According to [Campbell’s] explication [, however], there is the strongest presumption in favour of the testimony, till properly refuted by experience. (Campbell, 40-1; boldface mine)

Thus, Campbell argues that what we might call our “default attitude” with regard to testimony is, *and ought to be*, trust.<sup>8</sup>

Campbell argues that his position on testimony is not merely a strongly-held intuitive belief, but also a belief which is philosophically well-founded. To those who would object, “that such a faith in testimony as is prior to experience, must be unreasonable and unphilosophical, because unaccountable; [Campbell replies] that there are, and must be, in human nature some original grounds of belief, beyond which our researches cannot proceed, and of which it is in vain to attempt a rational account.” (Campbell, 41) It is important to note here that Campbell’s claim that there must, in human nature, be some original grounds for belief constitutes a bid to recognize testimony (like perception and memory) as an epistemically basic source of belief and justification. We will consider this point in greater detail in Section II, Part 2, when we discuss the status of Reid’s analogy between testimony and perception.

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Sydney Shoemaker’s use of “default” conditions in his discussion of first-person access in his *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 72.

I. Testimony as Reliant upon Inductive Inference

1. The Search for an Inductive Base in Support of Testimony

What, then, is the status of Hume's second conclusion, discussed in Section I, that "wise men" justify their belief in particular instances of testimony through inductive inference? In contrast to Hume, Reid holds that, "still to the end of life, [Reason] finds a necessity of borrowing light from testimony, where she has none within herself," *without* requiring that Reason always "mutually [give] aid to [testimony], and [strengthen] its authority." (197)

Indeed, Hume's own discussion of the practices of "wise men" in justifying their acceptance of testimony contains what seems to be a fatal equivocation. In his argument in Section X of the *Enquiry*, Hume clearly sometimes uses "experience" in the sense of corporate as opposed to private experience, and "we"/"us" in a corporate rather than a rhetorical (speaker-centered) sense.

In introducing the argument for his principle concerning testimony, for example, Hume writes that "*our* assurance in any argument [derived from the testimony of men] is derived from no other principle than *our* observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses." (*E*, 111) It ought to be clear that the only way in which such a derivation could have a solid enough inductive base is if the "our" in the preceding passage were to refer to a corporate assurance and corporate observation. If "our" is so parsed, however, it is equally clear that Hume's principle concerning testimony then ineluctably makes use of testimonial evidence in order to confirm "our" assurance in the veracity of human testimony.

As C.A.J. Coady<sup>9</sup> notes, Hume's treatment of testimony in passages in both the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise* demonstrates a

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<sup>9</sup>in his *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), particularly pp. 80-85. Campbell noted this in his *Dissertation*, as well. Indeed, Campbell recognizes that Hume's term, "miracle" —the counterpart to "the laws of nature", which are established by "a firm and unalterable experience" (*E*, 114)—is

consistent disregard for the importance of the distinction between the two uses of “we”/”us” discussed above. Coady points to an exemplary passage in the *Treatise* (I.iv.2.), in which Hume, in discussing his reasons for the belief in the continued, independent existence of material objects, writes: “I receive a letter, which, upon opening it, I perceive by the handwriting and subscription to have come from a friend, who says he is two hundred leagues distant. It is evident I can never account for this phenomenon, conformable to my experience in other instances, without spreading out in my mind the whole sea and continent between us, and supposing the effects and continued existence of posts and ferries, according to my memory and observation.” (*T*, 196) Clearly, Hume is not entitled to defer to *his* memory and observation with regard to his belief that the letter in his hands is the same as the one which his friend posted. For Hume certainly is not claiming to have accompanied the letter on its entire journey across “sea and continent” in various “posts and ferries”. Rather, what Hume is claiming is that he has observed postal deliverymen, posts, ferries, the sea, the continent (perhaps -- although not necessarily) from which his friend is writing.<sup>10</sup> But the only way

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“implicitly defined ... not what has never been observed *by us*, but (mark his words) *what has never been observed* IN ANY AGE OR COUNTRY. Now, what has been observed, and what has not been observed, in all ages and countries, pray how can you, sir, or I, or any man, come to the knowledge of? Only I suppose by testimony oral or written.” (Campbell, 68-9) In this comment, Campbell asserts that the observations and experiences upon which the distinction between natural and miraculous events rests are themselves gleaned from testimony, and claims that “he [Hume] falls into the paralogism which is called begging the question.” (Campbell, 70)

<sup>10</sup>Another (implicit) example of Hume’s lack of fastidiousness with regard to the distinction between personal and corporate experience may be found in the *Treatise*, I.iii.9, when compared with Hume’s claim, in the previously mentioned letter to Blair concerning Campbell, that “[n]o man can have any other experience but his own. The experience of others becomes his only by the credit which he gives to their testimony ...” (Greig, I:349). Compare this with the *Treatise*, where Hume writes: “I form an idea of Rome, which I neither see nor remember; but

to infer from these *personal* memories and observations that the letter in his hands is the same as the one his friend sent is for Hume to rely upon, in Coady's words, "a complicated web of testimony and inference, prominent amongst which would no doubt be what he was told by his teachers or parents". (Coady, 81)

A Cartesian with respect to testimony might object that one need only clean up the ambiguity with regard to "experience" and Hume's use of first person singular and plural pronouns in order to improve the formulation of Hume's principle with regard to testimony. Thus, J.L. Mackie writes that "[k]nowledge that one acquires through testimony ... can indeed be brought under the heading of ... authoritative knowledge, but only if the knower somehow checks, for himself, the credibility of the witnesses. And since, if it is a fact that a certain witness is credible, it is an external fact, checking this in turn will need to be based on observation that the knower makes himself ..." (Mackie,<sup>11</sup> 254).

Leaving aside the hereby unanswered objection, raised earlier, that it is impossible for a single knower to amass an inductive base

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which is connected with such impressions as I remember to have received from the conversation and books of travellers." (*T*, 108) In Hume's day, even more than in our own, people were wholly reliant upon travel books and histories for their experience of foreign lands. For those who never visit Rome (except in books), however, the only experience of Rome is that of other people. Nor would it do for Hume to respond that one must nevertheless inferentially ground the reliability of the testimony of travel books. For, if I never travel, what source am I going to have for the information against which to judge the past accuracy of travel books? Surely, if I bother to worry about the reliability of the books at all, I will ask those who have visited the countries in question to rate the reliability of the books. But then I am using testimony to verify the validity of testimony! On the account of "experience" in Hume's letter to Blair, only few people have experience of foreign countries -- leaving aside completely the issue of our experience of foreign *times* (i.e., the past).

<sup>11</sup>J.L. Mackie, "The Possibility of Innate Knowledge", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 70 (1970), pp. 245-57.

large enough adequately to support her belief in the reliability of testimony, I wish at this juncture to discuss another problem with Mackie's suggestion, one raised by our discussion of the inductive inference employed to probabilify or prove the reliability of a particular instance of testimony. In our discussion of Hume we noted that epistemic agents (on Hume's scheme) not only need inductively to infer premise (2) "If a G-testifier says that *p*, then *p*", but also premise (3) "T is a G-testifier".

The difficulty for Hume (and Mackie) posed by the requirement that one verify the premise "T is a G-testifier" is that, for the vast majority of cases (that is, those which are outside of the area of expertise of the knower), the question as to whether T is a G-testifier will be the same as the question as to whether T is an expert witness.<sup>12</sup> But the question of T's expertise is (in those cases outside of the area of expertise of the knower) one which can only be answered with recourse to further testimony (perhaps in the form of diplomas, professional recommendations, or published accounts -- or word-of-mouth reports -- of jobs well-done). If these observations are correct, however, then the Cartesian project of verification, independent of testimonial evidence, of the reliability of testimony seems perfectly hopeless.

## 2. The Analogy Between Perception and Testimony and the Question of Testimony's Inferential Support

Because of the seemingly insurmountable odds against achieving a global reduction of testimony, the contemporary debate has turned on the requirement of local reduction in the justification of testimonial reports. Elizabeth Fricker, and – more recently – Robert Audi have both posited the positive epistemic dependence of testimonially-derived beliefs on beliefs grounded in perception and reason. In this, the final section of this paper, I first discuss briefly

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<sup>12</sup>Coady raises a similar concern on pp. 83-5 of *Testimony*.

the aspects of Reid's analogy between perception and testimony that are relevant to the contemporary debate. I then examine Audi's position, as stated in his 1997 article "The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification,"<sup>13</sup> in the light of my discussion of Reid's analogy.

As has been noted, Reid conceives of both perception and testimony as being basic, irreducible and fallible sources of knowledge. The crucial point for our discussion here is that our "default attitude" with regard to testimony – precisely as with the deliverances of the senses – is one of belief. Indeed, Reid notes that

if Nature had left the mind of the hearer *in aequilibrio*, without any inclination to the side of belief more than to that of disbelief, we should take no man's word until we had **positive** evidence that he spoke truth. [...] It is evident that, in the matter of testimony, the balance of human judgment is by nature inclined to the side of belief; and turns to that side of itself, when there is nothing put into the opposite scale. If it was not so, no proposition that is uttered in discourse would be believed, until it was examined and tried by reason; and most men would be unable to find reasons for believing the thousandth part of what is told them. (197; boldface mine)

Compare Audi. With regard to justification, Audi writes "that at least normally, a belief based on testimony is [...] justified [...] provided the believer has overall justification for taking the attester to be credible regarding the proposition in question." (Audi, 412) Note that the relevant aspect of Audi's explication for our purposes is "a belief [...] is [...] justified [...] provided the believer *has* overall justification." This formulation suggests that the justification of testimonially based beliefs is *positively* dependent on

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<sup>13</sup> Robert M. Audi, "The Place of Testimony in the Fabric of Knowledge and Justification," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, 1997.

the belief's overall justification, including (especially) justification from perception and reason.

In the sentence immediately following the one quoted above, however, Audi cashes out the meaning of "has justification" in a way which is inimical to his reductive argument concerning testimonial justification. Audi writes, "*Having* this justification implies a *capacity* for inference, say about the attester's reliability, but *not* making an actual inference, conscious or unconscious." (Audi, 412; my italics) Since Audi allows here that one need not *make* an inference regarding, e.g., the reliability of the giver of testimony, Audi's principle regarding justification would only be damaging to a non-reductive account of testimonial justification if he could demonstrate that absolutely all cases of testimonial justification involve situations in which one not only *could* give an inference about the attester's reliability, but also *should* do so.

Audi himself admits that not all cases of testimonial justification require that one provide corroborative inferential support. "Receptivity to justification [from testimony]," he writes, "*sometimes* requires already having some measure of it, say for believing the attester credible or for believing *p* or for both. (*The justification might also be global ... one may be justified in believing, in the absence of specific grounds for thinking otherwise, that serious testimony tends to be true.*)" (Audi, 411) This qualification seems to suggest that Audi believes testimonial justification sometimes to be merely *negatively* dependent on the availability of corroborative support through perception and/or reason. This, however, is precisely Reid's position. Recall that Reid stresses "that, in the matter of testimony, the balance [...] is [...] inclined to the side of belief" in those cases "when there is nothing put into the opposite scale."

It is worth stressing, by way of conclusion, that such dependence is not sufficient to support reductionist claims about testimonial justification. As Audi himself notes in his book

*Epistemology*,<sup>14</sup> “vulnerability to defeat can be construed as a kind of dependence.” But then, returning to the analogy between perception and testimony, if we take perceptually generated beliefs to be defeasible, then we may take perceptual beliefs themselves to be dependent upon beliefs derived from testimony, memory, and/or reason. Indeed, few would deny that *every perceptual belief is potentially* defeasible. It would, however, seem ridiculous to assume that we would therefore be forced to conclude that *perception* is not a basic source of justification. Given this, then, we must also grant that testimony is an irreducibly basic source of justification; that is, that it does not require inferential support to serve as a source of justification and knowledge.

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14 *Epistemology* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 200.