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## Telling and Testimony

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# Telling and Testimony

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## Abstract

A central question in the epistemology of testimony concerns whether a speaker's testimony should count as a reason for a hearer to believe the content of the speaker's assertion. Proponents of the interpersonal view of testimony (IVTs) contend that it is the interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer that provides the hearer with a reason to believe what the speaker says. In contrast, critics of IVTs argue that the interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer is epistemically superfluous. Call this the *superfluity objection* to IVTs. In the following paper, I defend an IVT against the superfluity objection. I argue that the speech act of telling is both genuinely interpersonal and has epistemic import. As I present it, telling is an intersubjective, hence interpersonal, speech act: it constitutively requires more than one party for an act of telling to occur. Drawing from Grice (1989), I argue that the features which make telling constitutively intersubjective also contribute to making it genuinely epistemic. As such, the telling view of testimony avoids the superfluity objection, vindicating IVTs.

## 1 Introduction

It is a commonplace thought in social epistemology that we rely on others for knowledge. One way we rely on them is by trusting their testimony. In the paradigmatic scene of testimonial exchange, a speaker testifies to a hearer that  $p$ , and the hearer comes to believe  $p$  on the basis of the speaker's testimony. Through such exchanges, hearers can also come to know the content of the speaker's testimony. If I tell you that Springfield is the capital of Illinois and I know that Springfield is the capital of Illinois, you can come to know that Springfield is the capital of Illinois by believing what I tell you.

Testimony is thus a way we communicate our knowledge to others. It is

often thought that the primary speech act of communicating our knowledge, and hence of testimony, is assertion.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that all assertions are instances of a speaker testifying, nor is to say all instances of testimony involve assertions.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is just to claim that assertion is a central means by which we communicate our knowledge to others. Similarly, we can come to know new things by believing the assertions of others.

A central question in the epistemology of testimony concerns whether a speaker's testimony should count as a reason for a hearer to believe the content of the testimony. Since a principal way of offering testimony is by assertion, some epistemologists contend that we can best understand how believing testimony can be epistemically justified by first understanding what *kind* of assertion testimony is. Such an approach is central to a family of views called *interpersonal views of testimony*.<sup>3</sup>

For an interpersonal view of testimony (hereafter IVT), there is a special feature added to a speaker's assertion which makes it so that the hearer has a reason to believe that assertion. In other words, that special feature makes it so that the hearer is epistemically justified in believing the speaker's testimony in a way she is not when the assertion lacks that feature. According to IVTs, this feature is elucidated when we properly attend to the interpersonal nature of testimony, which has largely been ignored by reductionist, anti-reductionist, and hybrid accounts. Exemplary instances of this interpersonal feature are a speaker's *assurance of her word* or a speaker's *invitation to trust* what she says.

In contrast, critics of IVTs argue that the interpersonal relationship between

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<sup>1</sup>Unger (1979), Williamson (2000), and Hawthorne (2004) offer paradigmatic instances of this view.

<sup>2</sup>With regards to assertion without testifying, I might assert "I'll go to the store today" with no one around, hence with no one to testify to. With regards to the testimony without, Lackey (2008) proves instructive: If someone asked me, "who killed that man?," I might respond to their inquiry by pointing *at* someone, rather than asserting anything.

<sup>3</sup>Proponents of the interpersonal view include Ross (1986); Hinchman (2005); Moran (2005), (2018); McMyler (2011); Gelfert (2014).

speaker and hearer is epistemically superfluous. All other things equal, a hearer that has an interpersonal relationship with the speaker is in no better epistemic standing than an eavesdropper who overhears this exchange and forms the same belief from the speaker's testimony. The interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer thus proves to be epistemically impotent, providing the hearer with no additional reason to believe the speaker's testimony. Call this the *superfluity* objection to IVTs.

Although advocates of the superfluity objection are right to note that aspects of interpersonal relationships underlined by IVTs lack epistemic import, they do not adequately examine the mechanism by which a speaker assures a hearer of her word or invites a hearer to trust: namely, the speech act of *telling*. While earlier IVTs rely on telling in their accounts, they fail to show how it is simultaneously interpersonal and epistemic, opting instead to unpack non-epistemic aspects of interpersonal relationships. This consequently opens them up to the superfluity objection.

In the following paper I defend an IVT I call the *telling view of testimony*. I argue that the speech act of *telling* is both genuinely interpersonal and has epistemic import. I'll show that telling is constitutively an *intersubjective* speech act, hence is interpersonal. Moreover, I'll contend that telling isn't epistemically superfluous, but only seems so either due to assumptions about epistemic significance we ought to reject or because its significance is looked for in the wrong location.

I proceed as follows. I examine the two dominant IVTs: the *assurance* and *trust* views of testimony. The difference between these views pivots on what interpersonal feature they take to bestow epistemic weight on a speaker's assertion, which in turn contributes to the hearer's justification of believing the speaker's testimony. With the two dominant IVTs in place, I turn to two

versions of the superfluity objection as offered by Lackey (2008) and Goldberg (2015). While the superfluity objection is plausibly successful against assurance and trust accounts of testimony, it is not successful against the telling account of testimony.

In section three, I outline what I take the speech act of telling to be. In order to do so, I offer an account of what I call *intersubjective* speech-acts. Intersubjective speech acts are speech acts which constitutively require more than one party for them to be successfully performed. I'll argue that telling should count as an intersubjective speech act.

With the intersubjectivity of telling established, I turn (in section four) to showing why telling also has epistemic import. Following other IVTs, I'll rely on Grice to begin showing why tellings have an epistemic significance that ordinary assertions lack. With Grice's account in play, I'll argue that superfluity objections against telling assume a picture of epistemic significance we ought to reject. Once that picture has been rejected, we can come to locate the epistemic significance of telling by examining its irreducibly intersubjective nature.

## 2 The Interpersonal View of Testimony

### 2.1 Reductionism, Anti-Reductionism, and Interpersonal Relations

If I assert that it is five p.m., do you have a reason to believe that it is five p.m.? *Reductionists* maintain that I need *a posteriori* reason(s) to believe your assertion. If you are to believe that it's five p.m. on the basis of my assertion, the reductionist will claim that you are epistemically justified in doing so only if you have independent reason to believe my testimony is reliable. This independent reason must be nontestimonial: it needs to be based on an alternative

source of knowledge like perception, inference, or memory. If you have such a nontestimonial reason, you can be epistemically justified in believing my assertion. So, if you know I'm generally reliable when it comes to reporting the time, you consequently have a reason a reason to believe my assertion that it is five p.m.

Counter to reductionists are *anti-reductionists*. Anti-reductionists argue that you have *a priori* justification to believe my word. As long as you do not have reason(s) to doubt my assertion, you are justified in believing that it is five p.m. on the basis of my word.<sup>4</sup> So, *pace* reductionism, anti-reductionists contend that you need not have a nontestimonial reason to believe that it is five p.m. based on my saying so. Rather, my saying that it is five p.m. can by itself justify you forming the belief that it is five p.m.

Reductionism and anti-reductionism, as well as hybrid versions of the two, have historically dominated much of the discussion regarding how testimonial-based beliefs can be epistemically justified. Despite its dominance, the shape of the debate has been unsatisfying to some epistemologists. Richard Moran, for instance, has noted that debates between reductionism and anti-reductionism tend to ignore the “basic *relationship* between people when one person tells a second person something, and the second person believes him.”<sup>5</sup>

Moran's contention that reductionist and anti-reductionists have ignored the basic relationship of testimonial exchange is a central starting point for interpersonal views of testimony.<sup>6</sup> For IVTs, it is certain features of the interpersonal relationship that (at least sometimes) bestow epistemic weight on the assertion

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<sup>4</sup>That is, so long as there are no defeaters for my word present. If you know I am a compulsive liar or if you checked a reliable clock ten minutes ago that read three p.m., you would have a defeater for believing my utterance. For more on kinds of defeaters in testimony, see Lackey (2011).

<sup>5</sup>*The Exchange of Words*, p. 37., emphasis original.

<sup>6</sup>The relationship between IVTs and anti-reductionism is somewhat complex. Hinchman, for instance, offers his trust account as a “novel form of anti-reductionism.” As I'll explore in section 4.4, the telling view has more of an epistemic upshot if one is sympathetic to anti-reductionism over reductionism.

of the speaker, thus justifying the hearer in believing what she says. What that feature is varies different kinds of across IVTs, which I turn to now.

## 2.2 Assurance and Trust

There are two dominant IVTs in the literature: *trust*-based accounts and *assurance*-based accounts. These accounts acquire their name by virtue of the interpersonal feature those accounts take to bestow epistemic weight on a speaker's assertion in a testimonial exchange.

For assurance-based accounts, what bestows epistemic weight on the a speaker's assertion is that the speaker implicitly *assures* the hearer of the truth of her assertion. For our purposes here, there are two versions of the assurance view. The first contends that a case of ordinary assertion that  $p$  does not give the hearer a reason to believe that  $p$ , but rather it is the speaker's *assurance* that  $p$  is true which entitles the hearer to believe that  $p$ . The second version contends that my ordinary assertion that  $p$  might give you reason to believe that  $p$ , but my assurance that  $p$  gives you an additional, interpersonal reason to believe that  $p$ .

Similarly, trust-based accounts maintain that the interpersonal feature which bestows epistemic weight on a speaker's assertion is the speaker's implicit *invitation for the hearer to trust* the speaker.<sup>7</sup> According to trust accounts, a case of an ordinary assertion does not give the hearer a reason to believe what the speaker asserts. Instead, it is the speaker's implicit invitation to trust what the speaker says that gives the hearer reason to believe the speaker's assertion.

With the implicit invitation to trust or speaker's assurance comes what McMyler (2011) has called an "epistemic right to deferral" that is available only within interpersonal relationships. If I implicitly or explicitly invite you to

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<sup>7</sup>Hinchman (2005) is a central proponent of trust accounts; I model my formulation after his.



trust me, or assure the truth of what I say, you can hold me to my word. In other words, you can defer the burden of responsibility to me if my belief based on your testimony is challenged. This deference of responsibility cannot be had outside of the interpersonal relationship.

Since I am inviting you to trust me or am assuring you that my assertion is true, IVTs content that you acquire a *right of complaint* if I am wrong. Let's say I assure you that it won't rain today so you don't need to bring an umbrella on your walk to work. You believe me and consequently do not take an umbrella to work. On your way to work, it begins to rain heavily; you end up soaked. Since I assured you of my word and I was wrong, you rightfully can criticize me for assuring you when I didn't know.<sup>8</sup>

When I invite you to trust or assure you of my word, you are justified in believing what I say because you can defer to me and hold me accountable to what I say. These interpersonal dimensions between speaker and hearer are not available to those outside of the relationship. As such, justification for believing the speaker's word is not available outside of the interpersonal relationship.

An immediate worry is that we come to know propositions through the testimony of others that we are not in interpersonal relationships with. Since we can gain knowledge via testimony without having an interpersonal relationship with the speaker, it seems that such relationships are epistemically superfluous. Objections to IVTs along these lines are called superfluity objections. I turn to them now.

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<sup>8</sup>According to the Knowledge Norm account of Assertion (KNA), a speaker is open to criticism for asserting something she doesn't know. The right of complaint here is distinct from the criticism a speaker is open to for violating (KNA). A speaker who assures me that *p* but doesn't know that *p* will have violated (KNA), hence is open to criticism by anyone on that count. But I gain an additional reason to criticize her, a non-epistemic one. The speaker invited me to trust her; I relied on her and she failed me. She should have not invited me to trust her (or assure me of her word) if she didn't know, since that has direct consequences for me. As such, the grounds for my criticisms are distinct from the grounds of criticism that follow from violating (KNA).

### 2.3 The Superfluity Objection

The main objection to assurance and trust views is the *superfluity* objection. The superfluity objection maintains that the interpersonal features IVTs underline are epistemically superfluous. To illustrate how they are superfluous, Lackey (2008) offers the following case:

**EAVESDROPPER:** Ben and Kate, thinking they are alone in the office, engage in private conversation, in the course of which Ben tells Kate that their boss John is having an affair with a new intern, Irene. Their co-worker Earl who, unbeknownst to Ben and Kate, has been eavesdropping on their conversation, likewise comes to believe, solely on the basis of Ben's truthful and reliable testimony, that his boss is having an affair.<sup>9</sup>

In **Eavesdropper**, Ben and Kate have an interpersonal relationship that Earl does not share. Since there is an interpersonal relationship between Ben and Kate that Earl lacks, it seems that IVTs are committed to saying that Kate is epistemically justified in believing Ben's word in a way that Earl is not. That is, Kate is privy to epistemic justification that Earl is not.

Lackey argues that this is implausible. Assuming that Kate and Earl are "equally properly functioning as recipients of testimony, have the same relevant background information, both about Ben as a testifier and about the proposition to which he is testifying, and form their beliefs about the boss and Irene solely on the basis of Ben's testimony," Lackey contends that nothing distinguishes their beliefs epistemically.<sup>10</sup> Given that there is no salient evidence that Kate possesses that Earl does not, it is hard to see how Kate could be in a better epistemic position than Earl is: it doesn't seem as if the interpersonal relation-

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<sup>9</sup>This case is an abbreviated version of Lackey's Eavesdropper case found in *Learning From Words*, p. 233.

<sup>10</sup>*Learning From Words*, p. 234.

ship between Kate and Ben is doing any epistemic work. Consequently, Lackey concludes that interpersonal relationships are epistemically superfluous.<sup>11</sup>

Goldberg (2015) offers a more generalized superfluity objection. He argues that, if a speech-act is to have epistemic significance, it ought to contribute to an explanation of *the spread of knowledge*. But assuring someone of your word or inviting someone to trust gets cases regarding the spread of knowledge wrong. If inviting to trust and offering assurance are the only speech acts that explain the spread of knowledge, then IVTs are committed to the claim that Earl doesn't know that John is having an affair with Irene. But it is perfectly plausible that he does know, and that overhearing conversations the way Earl does is surely one way knowledge spreads. Plain assertion is a simpler speech act that explains more cases of the spread of knowledge; IVTs add unnecessary complications to assertion that fail to get relevant cases right.

Both Lackey and Goldberg can accept that interpersonal relationships grant participants a right to deferral privileged only to those in said relationships. Moreover, it does not follow from the superfluity objection that the right to complaint is not present in interpersonal relationships. It does seem that Kate can pass the buck to Ben in a way that Earl cannot; she can also complain to Ben if he is wrong in a way that Earl cannot. Since Ben didn't know, she should not have invited Kate to trust him or assure her of his word. But it is hard to see why this relationship places Kate in a better place epistemically than Earl.

Lackey and Goldberg are right to note that having the right to differ or criticize does not mean you are more epistemically justified than someone who, all other things equal, does not have those interpersonal rights. It is the empha-

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<sup>11</sup>This isn't to say that interpersonal relations are not significant to testimonial exchanges in *non-epistemic* ways. If I invite you to trust me that on the basis of our friendship and you do not, I may feel slighted as a friend. Indeed, perhaps you have even wronged me *qua* friend. But that does not mean you are failing to be epistemically impeccable. If I tell you that I didn't eat your ice cream but the evidence suggests I did eat your ice cream, you may violate the norms of friendship by not believing me, but you do not do anything epistemically problematic.

sis on the non-epistemic aspects of interpersonal relationships that leads IVT's open to the superfluity objection. As such, IVTs don't seem to offer anything genuinely *epistemic* to debates around testimony.

What is lost in discussions about the epistemic superfluity of assurance and trust is the speech act of *telling* by which a speaker implicitly invites a hearer to trust or assures the hearer of her word. Both assurance and trust views contend that it is the speech act of telling which implicitly invites a hearer to trust or assures the hearer of the speaker's word, thereby providing the hearer with rights of deferral and complaint. The language of "rights", however, lead IVTs into a non-epistemic domain, opening them up to the superfluity objection. As such, I want to re-center the intersubjective role of telling while placing concerns about "rights to deferral" and "rights to complain" to the side. By returning to the more fundamental speech act of telling, we can offer an IVT that is both genuinely interpersonal and epistemic.

As I present it below, telling is an *intersubjective* speech act: it cannot be successfully performed without the participation of multiple parties. Moreover, it offers reasons for belief in a way ordinary assertion does not. As such, it is simultaneously interpersonal and epistemic.

### 3 Intersubjective Speech Acts and Telling

#### 3.1 Intersubjective Speech Acts

Many of our speech acts do not require participation by other parties in order to be successfully performed. In order to assert, for instance, a speaker need not have an audience. I call such speech acts *solitary* speech acts.

**Solitary Speech Act** A speech act  $p$  is solitary if it is not constitutive of  $p$  that there is participation from more than one party involved in a suc-

successful instance of *p*.

While listening to music alone in my apartment, I can perfectly well assert that “*Daydream Nation* is Sonic Youth’s best album.” This utterance counts as an assertion regardless of whether or not there is an audience to hear my assertion. Moreover, I need not *intend* for there to be an audience in order for me to intentionally assert. It is therefore entirely contingent to assertion whether or not it communicates anything to others. Similarly, I can recite a poem without an audience, or curse, or sleep talk. I may do those things with an audience, but it is not constitutive of them that they require an audience.

In contrast to solitary speech acts are *intersubjective* speech acts.

**Intersubjective Speech Act** A speech act is intersubjective if it is constitutive of that speech act that more than one party participates in a successful instance of that act.

Commanding is an intersubjective speech act; it is *constitutively* intersubjective. My speech act of commanding someone to go to the grocery is intelligible insofar as there is a *someone* for me to command. It is constitutive of what it is to command that there be two parties: a commander and a subject who is commanded.<sup>1213</sup>

Unless there is another party to command, my utterance “Go to the grocery store” is what Austin (1962) called an *unhappy* speech act: an attempted speech act in which at least one of constitutive conditions fails to be satisfied.<sup>14</sup> I cannot successfully command if, among other things, there is no other person for me

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<sup>12</sup>There are more conditions for a successful instance of commanding than just the presence of two parties. Consider also that the speaker must have the relevant authority to command the subject(s) and that the hearers must be in a position to understand the speaker’s utterance.

<sup>13</sup>There is a genuine and complex issue here as to whether I can be the other party to my own intersubjective speech act: can I command myself, or make a promise to myself, or tell myself something. That problem must be entirely sidestepped here.

<sup>14</sup>See Lecture Two of *How to Do Things with Words*.

to successfully command. Commanding is therefore unlike assertion or reciting a poem, which do not require the participation of another party.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, I must *intend* to command if my speech act is to count as an instance of commanding. If I lack knowledge that I am commanding you to do something, then I am not commanding you.<sup>16</sup> If I command you to go to the pharmacy and pick up my medication, my utterance only will count as a command if I intend to command. If I say “go to the pharmacy and pick up my medication” under hypnosis or while I was asleep, it can’t be said that I have properly commanded you to do anything.

### 3.2 Telling as an Intersubjective Speech Act

Like commanding, telling is constitutively intersubjective. Telling can be done both linguistically and non-linguistically; I am primarily concerned with linguistic tellings here. When a telling is done with language, it is an intersubjective speech act. We can think of telling as a kind of intersubjective assertion. In order for the hearer to be told something, the hearer needs to hear that the speaker is speaking, register that the speaker is asserting something for the sake of informing her, and be in a position to understand what is said.

While a hearer needs to acknowledge that a speaker intends to communicate something with her in order for it to count as a telling, it does not follow that the hearer has to *accept* the speaker’s word in order for the speech act to count as a telling. I can be told something while refusing to believe what I’m told.

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<sup>15</sup>Although I focus on intersubjective speech acts that are intentional, it is noteworthy that there are unintentional intersubjective speech acts. If I assert that Daydream Nation is Sonic Youths best album, my assertion may have the perlocutionary effect of offense or inspiration. For my assertion to have the perlocutionary effect of being inspirational or offensive, there must be another party to find it inspirational or offensive. But it may be that I did not intentionally offend you or inspire you with my assertion. Perhaps I intended to share my opinion with you, but unintentionally offended you in the process. Such an act would be intersubjective, but an aspect of it would be unintentional.

<sup>16</sup>The kind of knowledge of what one is intentionally up to that I have in mind here is what Anscombe (1957) called *practical knowledge*.

For someone to be told something, they don't need to accept it: they just need to acknowledge that the speaker is conveying information to them.

All the same, if I try to tell you that Bergman's films are overrated and you don't hear what I say because you're wearing noise-cancelling headphones, I can't be said to have told you anything. If you try to tell me that there's pizza in the freezer in French and I don't speak French, you can't be said to have told me anything. Finally, if you try to tell me something and I have no reason to think it's a telling but rather a different speech act, you can't have been said to have told me something.

Note that someone can be *telling* someone something without the hearer having ever been *told* something; the language of "telling" is somewhat misleading. Like other intentional actions, tellings can fail to be completed. We can refer to ourselves in the past as *doing* some action while simultaneously being able to say we never *did* that action. Our actions might fail to see completion for a multitude of reasons: we get distracted, are interrupted, find what we are doing to be boring, hence stopping. So, I can rightly say that I was telling my friend about what happened to me at the store while also saying that I never told him what happened to me at the store. Similarly, you can truly say you were walking to the store without it being true that you walked to the store.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, telling is an *intentional* intersubjective speech act. If the speaker does not intend to tell, then they are not telling. In Lackey's **Eavesdropper** case, it would be right to say that Ben *told* Kate that John was having an affair with Irene. Additionally, if Ben was asked if he told Kate that John was having an affair with Irene, he would rightly answer affirmatively.

Part of the intention of telling is *who* the speaker intends to tell. If we asked Earl how he came to know that John and Irene were having an affair, it would

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<sup>17</sup>For more on the progression and completion of intentional action, see Michael Thompson's "Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge" and part 2 of *Life and Action*, "Naive Action Theory."

be wrong of Earl to say that Ben told him. He might say that he heard it from Ben or overheard Ben tell it to Kate, but it would be wrong for Earl to say that Ben told him. Ben did not intend for Earl to hear his utterance; as such, Ben did not *tell* Earl anything. If Ben asked how Earl knows that John and Irene were having an affair, he might say that Earl heard it from him, but he never told Earl that.

None of this is to say that Earl doesn't come to know that John and Irene are having an affair because Ben didn't tell him. Rather, it is simply to say that Earl was not told anything. But if Earl can know that John and Irene are having an affair without being told, what is the epistemic significance of telling?

Earl gets his justification *derivatively* from the original telling. On my telling account, all that is needed to bestow an assertion with epistemic weight is that *someone* is told. But the hearer who the speaker is telling to isn't in a more privileged epistemic position than someone who overhears the telling. All that matters for a telling account is that there is some intersubjective dynamic, i.e., that a successful telling occurs between a speaker and a hearer.<sup>18</sup>

If Ben is in a no better epistemic situation than Earl is, what could the epistemic significance of telling be? This is a natural but misleading question. We won't see the epistemic significance of telling by contrasting Ben and Earl, but rather by contrasting Ben and Earl's epistemic standing with someone who overhears an ordinary assertion that is not a telling. In order to see the epistemic weight of tellings, we need to contrast them with ordinary assertions, not overhearings.

In summary: telling is constitutively intersubjective. No one is told any-

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<sup>18</sup>Due to the robust interpersonal aspects of their accounts, such a response is not open to assurance and trust views. As proponents of the superfluity objection have noted, it is hard to see – if we assume an assurance or trust view – how Earl would be in equal epistemic standing to Kate without participating in the offer of assurance or trust. But Earl clearly seems to be in such equal epistemic standing. I contend that my telling account is both intersubjective and epistemic, hence avoiding this problem.



thing without the participation of more than one subject. If the speaker does not intend to convey information to a specific audience via assertion, then they are not telling. For someone to be told something – that is, for a telling to be successful – the intended audience must acknowledge that the speaker is attempting to inform them of something, and they must be in a position to understand the information conveyed. Finally, there is a distinction between someone *telling* someone something, someone being *told* something, and *accepting* what one is told. Someone might be told something without accepting it. Adjacently, a speaker might attempt to tell a hearer something, but the telling misfires in some way so that the hearer is never told – the would-be hearer may be wearing headphones so that she can't hear the speaker, the speaker may be using a language the hearer doesn't understand, and so on. If the hearer's acknowledgment or understanding is prevented, the telling will be unsuccessful.

## 4 The Epistemic Weight of Telling

### 4.1 Telling and Asserting

We have seen that assertion is a solitary speech act while telling is an interpersonal one. When I tell someone something, I make an assertion, but not all assertions are tellings. I might express a judgement via assertion without telling anyone anything. But why should we consider tellings epistemically unique, offering a reason for belief that ordinary assertions lack? Following other IVTs, I'll rely on Grice begin showing why tellings have an epistemic significance which is absent in ordinary assertions. Proceeding this, I'll defend the epistemic weight of telling against a revised superfluity objection.

## 4.2 Grice on Meaning

Ross (1986), Hinchman (2005) and Moran (2018) all draw on Grice (1989) to make sense of the epistemic import of telling. Unfortunately, they bestow telling with moral features, such as trust, which divert their accounts from adequately underlining telling's epistemic significance. Consequently, they open themselves up to the superfluity objection.

We need not take Grice the route other IVTs choose to. Instead, let's look at a reading of Grice which involves how a speaker bestows telling with epistemic import without the moral features IVTs add to it.

In his paper "Meaning," Grice juxtaposes two different senses of the words "meant," "means", "meaning," and the like. Grice calls the two sense "natural" and "non-natural" meaning. Examples of the first sense can be found in the following sentences:

- "The smoke meant there was a fire."
- "Her stumbling meant she had drank too much."

Grice contrasts those "natural" sentences with the following "non-natural" sentences:

- "When you asked 'did Thomas kill Saul?' and she showed you a photo of someone shooting another person, she meant that Thomas did kill Saul."
- "The ringing of the bell (on the bus) means that the bus is stopping."

It is important to note that, though Grice intends to demarcate two senses of the word "meaning," there is an alternative sense of "meaning" that both sets of sentences have. Both sentences have meaning insofar as they have a locutionary aspect: that is, they all "mean" something insofar as they have propositional content. So, the sentence "The smoke meant there was a fire" has both a natural

sense of meaning and a locutionary meaning – the sentence has propositional content, hence it “means” that proposition. When I speak of a sentence having or lacking “meaning” from this point forward, I do not mean it has or lacks locutionary meaning, but the natural or non-natural sense in question.

Let’s examine the first set of sentences. Natural meaning reflects casual relations in world. For our purposes here, we can say that a subject does not need to register any intention to grasp the salient natural meaning. When someone says “the smoke meant there was a fire,” we do not need to know whether the smoke intended to suggest there was a fire. Independent of any intentions, we can take the “meaning” here to be something like good evidence. We could reformulate the sentence as “the smoke meant there was a fire” as “the smoke was good evidence there was a fire.”

The same will hold with some cases of human agency and utterance. We don’t need to know what the stumbling drunk intended in order for us to say, “her stumbling meant she drank too much.” In other words, her stumbling serves as good evidence that she’s drunk. Similarly, we might say that someone loudly uttering “ow!” means that they are in pain – that is, it is good evidence they are in pain. Likewise, it is purportedly the job of a good analyst to uncover what slips of the tongue are evidence for, even if they are not intended as evidence for anything by the analyst.

The second set of sentences, those involving non-natural meaning, are significantly distinct from the first set. Unlike sentences that employ the natural sense of meaning, sentences that employ the non-natural sense are *dependent on an agent’s intention* in a particular way. The intention in part bestows the utterance with epistemic weight it would fail to have if the intention was absent.

While the exact conditions for non-natural meaning are contested in the literature, I am going to employ Grice in a way useful for my purposes.<sup>19</sup> First, the

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<sup>19</sup>I take my use of Grice to be similar to, though distinct from, Ross and Moran’s. Indeed,

speaker must intend to communicate something with her utterance. Moreover, the speaker must “have intended an ‘audience’ to recognize the intention behind the utterance.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, the audience must be in a position to *acknowledge* the subject’s intention.

Note the similarities between Grice’s conditions for non-natural meaning and the conditions for the speech act of telling. Non-natural meaning occurs only in intersubjective relations: there must be a speaker and a hearer to recognize and acknowledge the intention behind the speaker’s utterance. Once that is done, the speaker’s utterance *means* something, in the non-natural sense – her utterance gains standing as evidence. But these are the same conditions for telling: for an utterance to possess non-natural meaning seems to shift the utterance from an ordinary assertion to telling, which gains epistemic weight from the non-natural meaning that arises from the intersubjective nature of the speech act.

Consider the difference between hearing a bell ringing while walking down the street and while one is on a bus. While walking down the street, hearing a bell ring doesn’t *mean* anything – that is, it isn’t really good evidence for anything beyond the fact that a bell is ringing.

On the other hand, hearing a bell ring on a bus *does* mean something: it means the bus is stopping. The bus driver intends to tell her audience, the passengers, that the bus is stopping. Moreover, ringing the bell expresses to her audience what she intends to communicate: that the bus is stopping. Finally, the passengers are in a position to recognize what the bus driver intends to communicate. We can say that, when the bus driver rings the bell, she gives her audience a reason to believe something.

Similarly, finding an unclear photo of one person shooting another doesn’t

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I think Moran’s use of Grice is somewhat unhelpful in articulating how tellings are distinct from ordinary assertions.

<sup>20</sup>Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, p. 217

mean anything by itself – that is, it doesn't serve as evidence for much.<sup>21</sup> But when that same photograph is handed to me in response to my inquiry “did Thomas kill Saul?”, the photograph becomes evidence for something it wouldn't be independent of your intention to communicate something with me and my willingness to acknowledge that intention.

When you are told something, you are given a reason much like the way a bus driver gives her passengers a reason to believe the bus is stopping or when a photograph is handed to you in response to an inquiry. In our earlier cases, somebody *gives* another person a reason for believing something by ringing a bell or handing you a photograph in response to your inquiry. When you are told something rather than merely hearing an assertion, you are *given* a reason to believe from the speaker.

Let's say you overhear someone assert to themselves that it is five o'clock. As it stands, this assertion alone doesn't give you much of a reason to believe that it's five o'clock. You *could* believe it's five o'clock based on the assertion in the same way you *could* believe that Thomas killed Saul based on the photograph by itself. In neither case have you been *given* a reason to believe by anyone.

When I attempt to tell you something, I attempt to give you a reason for belief directly. In my attempt to give you a reason, I put you in a position to acknowledge my intention that I want to provide evidence to you for some belief. My assertion comes to “mean” something in the non-natural sense – it is evidence for something – because it is dependent upon my intention to tell you something and your acknowledgement of that intention. As such, my assertion (which is a telling) gains epistemic weight. Lacking the underlying telling relation, my assertion doesn't possess any non-natural meaning.

Handing me a photograph in response to my inquiry bestows epistemic

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<sup>21</sup>Granting what it is obviously evidence for: for example, that there exists a photograph of one person shooting another. We might say it doesn't serve for evidence beyond its own existence.

weight on the photograph it wouldn't have otherwise. When a bus driver rings a bell, it provides epistemic weight on the bell ringing that it wouldn't otherwise have. Likewise, when I tell you something, it gives my assertion epistemic weight it wouldn't have otherwise.

### 4.3 Epistemic Significance and the Superfluity Objection

We might begin to think that the epistemic weight of telling can entirely be explained by the context in which it occurs. One might contend it is the broader context that supplies the photograph, bell-ringing, and assertion with epistemic weight, not the intention of the subject to provide the hearer with a reason. Thanks to the context, there is more evidence for what the utterance might mean. A bus driver ringing a bell is strong evidence that the bus is stopping, but it has that status as strong evidence because of the context in which it takes place. We can infer from the context that, when the bus driver rings the bell, the bus is going to stop. If we had context for the overheard assertions, the discovery of the photograph, or the bell-ringing on the street, we'd be able to make similar inferences. As such, one does not need to acknowledge the speaker's speech act as telling a hearer that  $p$  to use it as good evidence to infer that  $p$ . So, the telling itself is epistemic superfluous for coming to know that  $p$ . Instead, the telling can be treated as an ordinary assertion that  $p$ .

There's something right about this line of reasoning. As we saw in **Eavesdropper**, someone external to the telling relationship can avail themselves of that telling. The availability of the telling allows Earl to know *derivatively* that John is having an affair with Irene by inferring from what Ben told Kate. Similarly, someone who overhears a bell ringing on a bus – say, through being on the other line of a phone call – can reasonably infer from that evidence that the bus is stopping.

Someone who overhears a telling comes to know the same propositions the participants of the telling relationship know, but know it in a different way: namely, by inferring from the speaker's word. If someone comes to know that  $p$  because they are told that  $p$ , but an overhearer can also come to know that  $p$  by inferring from the context of the telling that  $p$ , opponents of IVT will claim again that telling is epistemically superfluous, since telling doesn't contribute anything to what the hearer couldn't have come to know if the speech act was treated as an ordinary assertion within a particular context.

So why isn't telling epistemically superfluous? It will only seem superfluous given a particular assumption about epistemic significance, an assumption I contend we ought to reject. The superfluity objection against telling assumes the following about epistemic significance:

**Significance:** A speech act  $S$  with the content that  $p$  has epistemic significance only if the following is true: if speech act  $S$  with the content that  $p$  had not occurred, then the extent of knowledge that  $p$  would have been smaller.

If one assumes **Significance**, a superfluity objection against the telling view would run as follows. From an explanatory perspective, the telling view's explanation of how a hearer comes to know that  $p$  by being told that  $p$ , hence how knowledge that  $p$  spreads, can be explained by a simpler speech act: ordinary assertion. Ordinary assertions alone can explain how hearers come to know that  $p$ , thereby explaining how knowledge spreads.

We can explain how the spread of knowledge occurs in our earlier cases without telling. But if an ordinary assertion that  $p$  fails to occur, the extent of knowledge that  $p$  would be smaller. Since what the hearers come to know can be explained without appealing to tellings as a distinct speech act, simplicity dictates that we ought to opt for the simpler view. So, tellings are epistemically superfluous insofar as they do not contribute to the simplest explanation as to

how hearers can come to know that  $p$ , hence how knowledge that  $p$  spreads.

The superfluity objection against telling thus assumes **Significance** for its plausibility. But we should reject **Significance**. We should reject **Significance** because something can have epistemic significance with regards to  $p$  without contributing to the spread of knowledge that  $p$ .

Let's say you and I share an apartment. One day, I see you put on your coat and shoes, pack your bag with *Middlemarch*, and pick up your car keys. I rightly take all of this as evidence that you are about to leave the apartment and go read somewhere. Indeed, I come to *know* that you are going to leave the apartment and go read somewhere on the basis of this evidence.

As you walk to the door, you tell me "I'm going to go read somewhere." Since I already know from your actions that you are going to leave and go read somewhere, you telling me that you are going to the store does not contribute to the spread of knowledge that you are going to the library.<sup>22</sup> **Significance** would therefore have us hold that your telling is epistemically superfluous. Is this the right conclusion?

It doesn't seem so. Your telling is epistemically significant insofar as it gives me more evidence to believe that you are going to the store, even if I don't come to know any proposition I didn't already know by being told that you're going to the store. Compare my epistemic standing with that of another person, Michael. Michael's evidence for the truth of the proposition "You (the person I share my apartment with) are going to read somewhere" is that he sees you put on your coat and shoes, pack your bag with *Middlemarch*, and pick up your car keys. Even if, like me, Michael comes to know that you are leaving to go read somewhere, I'm in a better epistemic standing than Michael is. I'm in a better

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<sup>22</sup>Note that your telling me "I'm going to go read somewhere" can contribute to the spread of knowledge even if it doesn't contribute to the spread of knowledge with regards to that proposition. For instance, your telling me "I'm going to go read somewhere" contributes to my knowing that you want to tell me something, hence to the general spread of knowledge.



epistemic epistemic by virtue of having more evidence due to the telling, not because knowledge with respect to the proposition spread due to your telling.

Since a speech act can have epistemic significance by adding to my evidence in favor of a proposition while failing to spread knowledge of that proposition, we should reject **Significance**. If we reject **Significance**, we can allow that telling has epistemic significance even if a telling that  $p$  doesn't add to the spread of knowledge that  $p$ .

#### 4.4 Irreducible Intersubjectivity

I hope to have shown that we have good reason to reject **Significance**. But rejecting **Significance** doesn't show us that telling *is* epistemically import: it only shows that we don't have a reason to think telling *isn't* epistemically significant.

One way the epistemic import of telling can be elucidated is by the Gricean account of non-natural meaning explored in section 4.2: the assertion's status as evidence is dependent on the speaker's intention to communicate that  $p$  to the hearer and the hearer's acknowledgement of that intention. But even with the Gricean account in play, it's still hard to see why someone who comes to believe that  $p$  from being told that  $p$  is in a better epistemic standing than someone who overhears that same telling.

For the purposes of remaining agnostic about the debate between reductionism and anti-reductionism, I want to grant that there is no difference in the epistemic standing between someone who comes to believe that  $p$  by being told that  $p$  and someone who overhears that telling and comes to believe  $p$  on that basis. As I noted at the end of section 3.2, to look for the epistemic import of telling by examining overhearing cases is misleading. It's misleading because it attempts to locate the epistemic weight of telling in the wrong place.

Rather than searching for the epistemic import of telling in the spread of knowledge that comes from the speech act (as we saw with **Significance**) or the justificatory standing of the hearers, I want to underline what constitutes the assertion as having epistemic standing at all. As we've seen from Grice, the the assertion's status as evidence is dependent on the speaker's intention to communicate that  $p$  to the hearer and the hearer's acknowledgement of that intention – that is, when someone is *told* something. Moreover, this act is a constitutively intersubjective speech act. Consequently, what allows certain assertions – the ones that come to count as tellings – to have epistemic standing is when something *irreducibly intersubjective* occurs.

Telling gains its epistemic status only by appeal to an irreducibly intersubjective dynamic. If there is no telling, the assertion loses its epistemic standing: neither the hearer or the overhearer can make use of it. Since it is intersubjective, the overhearer cannot make use of the assertion if there is no one being told. It doesn't follow from this that the intersubjectivity of telling is epistemic superfluous, since it is only by the route of intersubjectivity that the assertion gains epistemic weight at all. In other words: if there's no intersubjectivity, then the assertion doesn't have epistemic import.

## 5 Conclusion

Both proponents of the superfluity objection and earlier IVTs were wrong to search for the epistemic weight of telling by examining the epistemic standing of the hearer of a telling and an overhearer of the telling. I hope to have shown that a tellings' epistemic significance is not to be found in justification or evidence that the hearer has that the overhearer lacks. Rather, the epistemic significance of telling is located in a telling's constitutive intersubjectivity: no one can be told anything without the participation of another party. Moreover, it gains

its status as a reason to believe by virtue of its irreducibly intersubjectivity. Without the intersubjective features, it doesn't count as evidence – not for the hearer, not for the overhearer.

As presented, my conclusion doesn't show that someone who is told is in a better epistemic position than someone who overhears that telling. To make that claim I'd have to take a stand on disputes between reductionism and anti-reductionism, which I hope to remain neutral about here.

That said, it is noteworthy that the upshot of my view here is more significant for anti-reductionists than for reductionists. If you're an anti-reductionist, telling is an irreducibly intersubjective way of coming to know something. It is thus metaphysically distinct from inference, memory, and perception, which are not irreducibly intersubjective sources of knowledge. The person who is told something thus gains access to a seemingly *sui generis* source of knowledge that someone who overhears (and infers from the overhearing) does not have access to.

This seems to be the right direction to take an account of telling. If telling is a metaphysically unique source of knowledge by virtue of being irreducibly intersubjective, it is a distinct way of coming to know than memory, inference, and perception. Moreover, if telling rather than ordinary assertion is the speech act by which a speaker testifies, certain forms of testimony will also count as irreducibly intersubjective, hence prove to be a unique source of knowledge. And this is exactly what the anti-reductionist hopes to show.

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