

Article

From Truth to Trust: A Reconsideration of the Epistemological Genealogy of the Philosophy of Testimony

Guanghuan Xie 

College of Philosophy and Law, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai 200234, China;
1000610507@smail.shnu.edu.cn

Abstract

Contemporary philosophy of testimony examines testimony as a source of knowledge and often traces this inquiry through Plato, Augustine, and Hume. This article reassesses that genealogy through a conceptual historical and comparative reading of their texts. It first outlines the epistemological framework of testimonial justification, then asks how that framework represents the concerns of the classical discussions. The readings bring out differences that a continuous history of testimonial knowledge can obscure. Plato connects truthful speech with the speaker's orientation toward truth; Augustine considers belief within the movement from authority to understanding; and Hume's assessment of miracle reports involves judgments about witnesses' character, motives, and social relations. In each case, questions about knowledge arise within a broader account of the relation between persons. The issue is how much of that relation is captured when testimony is interpreted chiefly through the conditions of justified belief. Contemporary approaches to assurance and trust already give the speaker–hearer relation an important place in epistemology. The historical analysis further directs attention to understanding what a witness is bearing witness to, including the meaning of the experience for the person who recounts it. It thus gives a historical and conceptual basis for approaching testimony as a hermeneutical problem.

Keywords: testimony epistemology; Plato; Augustine; Hume

1. Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, the philosophy of testimony has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within contemporary epistemology. For much of the history of Western epistemology, philosophical attention was directed primarily toward traditional sources of knowledge, such as perception, memory, and inference, while testimony—despite its indispensable role in everyday epistemic practice—received comparatively little systematic analysis. With the pioneering work of scholars such as C.A.J. Coady and Tyler Burge, testimony came to be recognized as an autonomous source of knowledge, giving rise to a sophisticated body of literature addressing issues including the epistemic justification of testimonial knowledge, the rationality of testimonial belief, and the role of testimony in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. The development of testimony epistemology has also been accompanied by the construction of an intellectual genealogy extending from Plato and Augustine to Hume. Plato's distinction between knowledge (*epistēmē*) and opinion (*doxa*), Augustine's reflections on faith and authority, and Hume's analysis of testimony concerning miracles have all been incorporated into this genealogy and interpreted as successive stages in the philosophical investigation of testimonial knowledge.



Academic Editor: Marcin J. Schroeder

Received: 3 September 2026

Revised: 8 October 2026

Accepted: 11 October 2026

Published: 19 October 2026

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This reconstruction raises a question about the texts it brings together: did these thinkers conceive testimony primarily as an epistemological problem? Their discussions belong to different contexts. Plato examines truth and rhetoric, Augustine considers the relation between belief and understanding, and Hume evaluates miracle reports through judgments about witnesses and evidence. Reading these discussions together requires attention to the concerns that give each its particular significance.

The question of how testimony yields knowledge provides a useful basis for comparison, but it also selects which aspects of these texts receive attention. Trust, authority, and credibility may then be considered chiefly for their contribution to justified belief. Returning to the texts allows a further question to emerge: how does accepting what another person says relate to understanding that person's act of testimony? This question connects the historical inquiry to the problem of intersubjective understanding.

The aim of this article is to reassess the epistemological genealogy through which contemporary philosophy of testimony has interpreted Plato, Augustine, and Hume. It adopts a conceptual historical and comparative approach, beginning with the debate over testimony's status as a source of knowledge, the justification of testimonial acceptance, and the social transmission of knowledge. It then examines how this framework has shaped the interpretation of classical texts through close readings of Plato's discussions of knowledge and rhetoric, Augustine's account of belief and authority, and Hume's evaluation of miracle testimony. These readings attend to the questions each author addresses and to the role of the speaker within those questions. They provide the basis for examining the limits of treating the texts as stages in a continuous inquiry into testimonial knowledge. The central issue is the relationship between accepting a proposition and trusting the person who speaks. By bringing this relationship into view, the article identifies a problem of intersubjective understanding within testimonial practices and establishes a historical and conceptual basis for further hermeneutical inquiry.

2. The Basic Framework of the Epistemology of Testimony

The early development of contemporary philosophy of testimony was firmly situated within an epistemological framework. Traditional epistemology has long conceived knowledge as something acquired by an individual epistemic subject through perception, memory, and inference, while testimony was generally regarded as a derivative source of knowledge rather than an autonomous one. In comparison with first-person experience and direct cognitive access to the world, beliefs formed on the basis of another person's testimony were often considered epistemically dependent and therefore philosophically secondary. This conception largely reflects an epistemological tradition that can be traced back to Plato. Within this tradition, genuine knowledge is expected to possess certainty, and such certainty is thought to require the subject's direct cognitive access to its object. Consequently, beliefs grounded in the testimony of others have frequently been regarded as epistemically less secure than those based on perception or rational demonstration, and their epistemic justification has therefore remained a matter of philosophical concern [1].

2.1. *Reductionism and the Independence of Testimony*

Within the epistemological framework, Hume is widely regarded as one of the principal intellectual sources of contemporary reductionism about testimony [2,3]. On this view, testimony cannot provide epistemic justification in its own right; rather, its justificatory force must ultimately be reduced to more fundamental epistemic resources, such as perception, memory, and inductive reasoning. A subject accepts a witness's testimony not because testimony itself possesses intrinsic epistemic authority, but because there are independent reasons for regarding the testimony as reliable. It is precisely this reductionist conception of

testimonial justification that Coady seeks to challenge. Coady argues that a strict Humean account places an excessively demanding burden on the epistemic subject. If testimonial credibility can be assessed only on the basis of sufficiently rich and independent experience, then the subject must already possess extensive knowledge prior to accepting testimony. Yet this requirement proves untenable, since much of what individuals know—including historical events, geographical facts, and social realities—is itself acquired through the testimony of others. In other words, experience is invoked to justify testimony, while experience itself is, to a significant extent, constituted by testimony [4] (pp. 80–82).

In his early discussions of Hume's account of testimony, Coady had already argued that Hume was ultimately unable to sustain a strict priority of observation over testimony. On the one hand, Hume maintains that the credibility of testimony must be grounded in repeated observation and experience. On the other hand, he also acknowledges that testimony may sometimes correct—or even override—the conclusions drawn from an individual's own observations. If our knowledge of general empirical regularities is itself derived, at least in part, from the testimony of others, then the relationship between experience and testimony can no longer be understood as a one-way foundational relation. Rather, the two stand in a relation of mutual epistemic dependence [5]. Consequently, Hume's attempt to establish the credibility of testimony on the basis of experience ultimately falls into a form of epistemic circularity.

In response, Coady argues that testimony should not be regarded as a derivative source whose epistemic status depends entirely on other cognitive resources. Rather, it should be recognized as a basic source of knowledge. Just as perception does not first have to establish its overall reliability before it can function as a source of knowledge, testimony likewise does not require independent empirical confirmation in order to possess *prima facie* epistemic justification [4] (pp. 144–145).

2.2. Testimonial Acceptance and the Social Transmission of Knowledge

Coady's critique of reductionism demonstrates that testimony cannot simply be reduced to other epistemic resources. Yet it leaves open a further question: if testimony is a basic source of knowledge, on what grounds is a hearer justified in accepting the testimony of others? Put differently, does the basic epistemic status of testimony entail that testimony ought to be accepted indiscriminately? It is precisely this question that has led contemporary philosophy of testimony to shift its focus from the status of testimony as a source of knowledge to the conditions under which testimonial acceptance is epistemically justified. Against this backdrop, Tyler Burge, drawing upon the framework of epistemological externalism, offers a systematic account of the epistemic rationality of testimonial acceptance. Unlike Hume, who requires the hearer to possess independent evidence of a speaker's reliability before accepting testimony, Burge argues that ordinary linguistic communication already presupposes a socially distributed division of epistemic labor. In normal communicative contexts, hearers need not undertake a comprehensive prior assessment of a speaker's credibility. Rather, they enjoy a *prima facie* entitlement to accept what others tell them. Unless there are positive reasons for doubt, a hearer is *prima facie* entitled to accept the testimony of others [6].

Burge's account effectively frees testimony from the constraints of individualistic epistemology. On his view, knowledge is not grounded exclusively in reasons accessible from the subject's own perspective but depends to a significant extent upon socially organized epistemic practices. Just as individuals cannot independently verify most of the scientific knowledge they possess, the acceptance of testimony does not ordinarily require independent scrutiny of every speaker's reliability. A hearer's entitlement to accept testimony therefore does not rest on having first established its reliability through inde-

pendent investigation. Rather, it arises from participation in a social world structured by linguistic communication and the shared transmission of knowledge. Burge's account thus brings to light the fundamentally social character of knowledge. Knowledge is not enclosed within the individual subject but is continually sustained and extended through linguistic communities. The significance of testimony lies not merely in enabling individuals to acquire new beliefs, but in constituting one of the basic conditions for the transmission of knowledge across generations and among members of a community.

Building upon this insight, Jonathan E. Adler argues that the epistemological significance of testimony extends beyond the individual's acquisition of knowledge to its indispensable role in the social distribution of epistemic resources. Since individuals cannot independently verify most of what they know, the formation and preservation of knowledge necessarily depend upon the cognitive labor of others [7]. Through testimony, knowledge extends beyond the limits of individual experience and is continually transmitted across members of a linguistic community, thereby becoming a shared epistemic resource. Knowledge thus no longer appears merely as a state of belief within an individual mind but increasingly assumes a public and socially distributed character.

3. The Problem of Testimony in Classical Texts

Within this epistemological framework, the study of testimony has already expanded from individual testimony to group testimony situated within social relations and interactions. Goldberg's critique of epistemic individualism, for example, shows that the formation of testimonial knowledge depends upon irreducibly social factors [8] (pp. 10–35). Moran, Faulkner, and McMyler, drawing respectively upon assurance, trust, and second-personal reasons, place the relationship between speaker and hearer at the center of their analyses of testimony [9,10] (pp. 201–204), [11] (pp. 142–170). The development of collective epistemology has further brought group testimony within the scope of epistemological inquiry [12]. These approaches already give interpersonal relations an important place within epistemology. They provide a contemporary point of reference for the historical inquiry that follows: how do the questions of trust and understanding appear in the classical texts, and what happens when those texts are organized around the justification of testimonial belief?

In contemporary attempts to trace the intellectual sources of the epistemology of testimony, Plato, Augustine, and Hume remain important historical points of reference. In his foundational study, Coady connects the longstanding neglect of testimony in Western philosophy with an ideal of knowledge inherited from the Platonic tradition [4] (pp. 5, 16–18). He also systematically discusses Augustine's recognition of testimonial knowledge [4] (pp. 18–21) and takes Hume's analysis of miracles and testimony as a principal historical object of his examination of modern reductionism [4] (pp. 79–82). Subsequent research has further situated Augustine within the history of the epistemology of testimony [13,14], while Hume's status as a major intellectual source of testimonial reductionism has likewise become part of its standard historical narrative.

These historical points of reference raise a question about the continuity presumed by the genealogy: were the three thinkers addressing the same philosophical problem? Plato's distinction between knowledge and opinion, Augustine's reflections on faith and authority, and Hume's analysis of miracle reports arose within different discussions of knowledge, religious belief, and argument. Interpreting them through the question of how testimony functions as a source of knowledge makes their conceptual connections visible. It also risks treating their original concerns as preliminary versions of a later question. The term "over-epistemologization" will be used here for this interpretive tendency: allowing the question of testimonial knowledge to determine the significance of the classical discussions as a whole.

3.1. Plato: From the Distinction Between Knowledge and Opinion to the Manifestation of Truth

In Book V of the *Republic*, Plato famously distinguishes knowledge (epistēmē) from opinion (doxa), maintaining that “knowledge is of what is” (Rep. 478b), whereas opinion occupies the intermediate realm “between being and not-being” (Rep. 478d). Whereas knowledge is directed toward stable and unchanging reality, opinion concerns the mutable world of appearances and therefore lacks the certainty and necessity characteristic of genuine knowledge. This distinction is further developed in the *Theaetetus*, where Plato illustrates the point through the example of a courtroom. Although jurors may form beliefs on the basis of witnesses’ testimony, they cannot be said to possess knowledge because they have not directly apprehended the facts themselves (Tht. 201a–c). Knowledge, in this account, requires an immediate cognitive relation between the knower and the object known—a condition that testimony, by its very nature, cannot satisfy. Consequently, within this Platonic framework, testimony can at best provide grounds for opinion about reality; it cannot, by itself, attain the epistemic standing of knowledge [15].

This gives rise to a fundamental difficulty. If knowledge requires the subject’s direct cognitive access to its object, then much of what is ordinarily taken to be knowledge would have to be excluded from its scope. Historical events, geographical facts, social realities, and even facts about one’s own origins are seldom acquired through first-hand experience; rather, they depend upon the testimony of others. On a strict Platonic conception of knowledge, such beliefs could amount at most to beliefs about reality, but not to knowledge in the full sense. Yet this conclusion sits uneasily with ordinary epistemic practice. Human beings rely pervasively on the testimony of others, and such epistemic dependence is not merely unavoidable but constitutive of social life itself. Here a fundamental tension emerges: whereas classical epistemology demands that knowledge rest upon the subject’s direct cognitive apprehension, actual human cognition is irreducibly dependent upon the words and testimony of others.

Contemporary philosophy of testimony frequently treats the discussion of courtroom witnesses in the *Theaetetus* as one of the earliest formulations of the philosophical problem of testimony. Yet a return to the dialogue itself suggests a different emphasis. Plato’s primary concern is not to develop a theory of testimony, but to determine the nature of knowledge. The example of the witness is introduced not to examine the epistemic standing of testimony as such, but to clarify the distinction between true belief and knowledge. Likewise, in the *Republic*, the distinction between knowledge and opinion is framed in terms of the soul’s relation to being, rather than the epistemic relation between a witness and a hearer. Plato’s discussion therefore belongs primarily to the theory of knowledge rather than to the philosophy of testimony as it would later be understood.

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato illustrates the distinction between knowledge and true belief by means of the example of a courtroom trial, arguing that testimony may produce true belief but cannot, by itself, constitute knowledge [16]. A comparable example appears in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato approaches the issue from a different perspective. He imagines a case in which a physically weak but courageous man assaults and robs a strong yet cowardly man. When the case comes before a court, each party offers a conflicting account of what has occurred (Phdr. 273b–d). The question raised by this example is not simply which party is telling the truth. Each litigant has an obvious interest in presenting the events in a manner favorable to his own case. What is at issue, therefore, is not whether the hearer can acquire knowledge, but how rhetorical discourse shapes the audience’s judgment. Because the jurors have no direct access to the facts, they must rely entirely on the competing accounts offered by the litigants—accounts that are inevitably shaped by self-interest, partisan commitments, and rhetorical strategies of persuasion. Throughout most of the *Phaedrus*, Plato consistently criticizes rhetoric that seeks merely to secure the audience’s

assent, contrasting it with dialectic, whose aim is the attainment of truth [17]. Within this framework, the courtroom example implicitly raises a more fundamental question: if judicial decisions depend upon competing testimonies, what distinguishes genuine testimony from persuasive rhetoric? Put differently, what prevents testimony from degenerating into a merely rhetorical technique for securing belief rather than conveying truth?

Plato does not respond to this problem by appealing to an epistemic criterion for verifying testimony. Faced with the tension between rhetoric and truth, he concludes that one should “conduct oneself in such a way that one’s every word and deed is worthy before the gods” (Phdr. 273e). In other words, the truthfulness of testimony depends not primarily on external procedures of verification, but on whether the speaker’s life is itself oriented toward truth. The ultimate guarantee of truthful testimony lies not in argumentative skill, but in the condition of the speaker’s soul and its pursuit of the good.

From this perspective, while the courtroom example in the Theaetetus may indeed illustrate the distinction between knowledge and true belief, the discussion in the Phaedrus invites a different reading: Plato’s account of courtroom testimony may be approached less as a problem of testimony than as a hermeneutical problem. Testimony in court is problematic not because it “comes from others,” but because it exists within a sphere in which truth cannot manifest itself directly and can only be recognized through a contest of discourses. Plato’s central concern, therefore, is not testimony itself, but rather the question of how discourse can lead to truth. When truth cannot be directly known, an excessive reliance on testimony risks reducing discourse to a mere “art of persuasion,” while diverting attention from the pursuit of genuine virtue [18] (p. 299). Scholars such as Coady typically regard the Theaetetus as the starting point of the Western “anti-testimonial tradition” [4] (pp. 5, 21–22) and, on this basis, reconstruct an intellectual lineage extending from Plato to Hume. The discussion in the Phaedrus, however, suggests that testimony in Plato’s philosophy cannot be reduced to an epistemological problem alone.

3.2. Augustine: From the Mediation Between Belief and Knowledge to the Understanding of Faith

The difficulty disclosed by Plato is that, when facts cannot manifest themselves directly to the hearer, the subject must approach truth through the words of others. This gives rise to tensions between knowledge and opinion, and between truth and rhetoric. Augustine responds differently to this problem of indirectness. Rather than attempting to resolve the question of whether belief without direct apprehension can constitute knowledge, he calls for recognition that finite human beings must first believe before they understand. The focus thus shifts from the tension between the words of others and the certainty of knowledge to the relationship among belief, authority, and understanding.

Augustine first observes, “When we wish to speak correctly, we say that we know only what we grasp with the firm reason of our minds” (Retract. 1.14.3). In other words, genuine knowledge must be grounded in the subject’s own rational apprehension, whereas beliefs acquired through the testimony of others, lacking such direct cognitive access, cannot attain the certainty characteristic of knowledge. Yet an outright rejection of testimony is clearly incompatible with the realities of human cognitive life. Augustine therefore turns to the question of “belief” (credere) and its indispensable role in human cognition. He recognizes that much of what human beings know cannot be established either through first-hand experience or through demonstrative proof. For example, no one can personally verify the circumstances of their own birth, nor can anyone independently confirm every historical event. Yet people nonetheless justifiably believe that such events have occurred. In *On the Profit of Believing* (De utilitate credendi), he distinguishes three closely related cognitive acts: understanding (intellegere), belief (credere), and opinion (opinari): “There are also three things, as it were bordering upon one another, in the minds of men well

worth distinguishing; understanding, belief, opinion. And, if these be considered by themselves, the first is always without fault, the second sometimes with fault, the third never without fault" (Util. cred. 11.25). Among these, "understanding" represents reason's direct apprehension of truth and therefore constitutes the highest form of cognition. "Opinion", by contrast, arises when one mistakenly takes what one does not truly know to be knowledge, and is thus invariably marked by epistemic deficiency. "Belief", however, occupies an intermediate position between the two. The believer does not claim to possess truth through understanding; rather, they acknowledge the absence of such understanding while nevertheless accepting a proposition on the basis of sufficient grounds.

Augustine also distinguishes the grounds of these cognitive acts: "What then we understand, we owe to reason; what we believe, to authority; what we have an opinion on, to error. But everyone who understands also believes, and also everyone who has an opinion believes" (Util. cred. 11.25). The distinction concerns the subject's attitude toward the limits of understanding. Opinion involves the presumption of knowing what one does not know. Belief acknowledges the absence of direct understanding and can therefore remain open to further learning. This gives belief a place of its own in Augustine's account. Testimony can yield knowledge, although not knowledge in its strictest sense [19].

Authority thus plays a different role in Augustine's account from the one suggested by an ideal of knowledge based entirely on direct apprehension. A person may have grounds to trust another's words before being able to understand their truth independently. Augustine retains understanding as the aim of cognition, while recognizing that belief often makes the pursuit of that aim possible. This relation among authority, trust, and cognition explains why his work became an important point of reference for later discussions of testimony.

The religious setting gives this account of authority its specific purpose. On the Profit of Believing examines why belief is necessary and legitimate within religious life. Its claims about human dependence on others belong to that inquiry.

Read in its textual context, *On the Profit of Believing* places the distinction between understanding, belief, and opinion within an argument about conversion and faith. The treatise does not set out a general epistemological theory of testimony. Rather, it was written to persuade Augustine's friend Honoratus to abandon Manichaeism and to clarify the distinction between truth and error (Util. cred. 1.1–2). The contemporary readings introduced above draw attention to the epistemic legitimacy Augustine accords belief. His immediate concern, however, is how finite human beings can approach truth when they have not yet understood authoritative teaching for themselves. This concern also has a social dimension: he argues that if people refused to believe what they had not personally understood, "there would be no security whatsoever in human society" (Util. cred. 12.26). Dependence on others is therefore part of his account of belief, even though the argument is directed toward religious life.

The dispute turns on whether rational demonstration must precede religious belief. The Manichaeans claimed to possess the truth through their explanations of the structure of the world, the origin of evil, and the principles governing the universe, and criticized Christianity for resting upon unproven faith. Augustine challenges the demand for prior understanding while retaining the importance of reason and argument. His account of human finitude explains why a person cannot attain full understanding of God, salvation, and ultimate truth before making a commitment of belief [20] (pp. 136–138).

The maxim "Believe, in order to understand" (crede, ut intelligas) (Serm. 43.7) expresses this relation between faith and understanding. Augustine connects it to his reading of Isaiah: "If you do not believe, you will certainly not stand firm" (Isa. 7:9). The interpretation of Scripture gives the relation a concrete form. Divine truth is presented through sensible signs and historical events that point beyond the literal text. Understanding re-

quires a movement from what is visible toward the invisible truth to which it refers. Faith provides the starting point for this interpretation, whose aim remains understanding [21].

Augustine's account of belief consequently has a purpose that must be kept in view when it is read within the history of testimony. Acceptance of authoritative discourse matters because it enables finite human beings to approach divine revelation. Contemporary questions about the justification of testimonial belief illuminate part of this account. Its religious purpose also directs attention to how believing changes the subject's capacity to understand. This is the aspect that becomes less visible when belief is treated chiefly as acceptance of another person's statements.

3.3. Hume: From Empirical Reasoning to the Credibility of Witnesses

Augustine's defense of authority and belief, however, did not become the dominant trajectory of modern epistemology. By appealing to authority and belief, Augustine explains how finite human beings can enter into truth before they understand. Yet this answer also leaves open a further question: why should the words of others be trusted? If belief cannot rest upon authority alone, then the assessment of the speaker's credibility must seek a new basis. With the rise of modern subject-centered philosophy, the foundation of knowledge came to be located increasingly within the autonomous subject. From Descartes's method of universal doubt to Locke's investigation of the origins of ideas, epistemic certainty was understood as resting upon what the subject could validate through its own reason or experience. In comparison with direct experience and rational demonstration, knowledge acquired through the testimony of others was once again relegated to a derivative epistemic status. This tendency reached one of its clearest expressions in the British empiricist tradition. Although Hume fully acknowledged that human beings rely extensively on the testimony of others, he did not regard testimony as an autonomous source of knowledge. Rather, the epistemic force of testimony ultimately depends upon standards of evidence established independently of testimony itself. In his discussion of miracles, Hume famously argues that "a wise man. . . proportions his belief to the evidence" (EHU 10.4), and further maintains that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish" (EHU 10.13). Whether testimony ought to be accepted depends instead on independent grounds for judging both the reliability of the witness and the consistency of the testimony with prior experience.

For Hume, the ordinary credibility of testimony rests on accumulated experience of the relation between what people say and what occurs. Experience supports expectations about witnesses' conduct and provides grounds for judging particular reports (EHU 10.5–6). Testimony can therefore support rational belief, although its justification remains probabilistic rather than certain [22] (p. 12). On this account, testimonial warrant is derivative: it depends on empirical judgments about reliability. The significance of this point for the discussion of miracles is that the hearer must weigh a report against prior experience while also considering the person who makes it.

We may now turn more closely to Hume's argument in Section X, "Of Miracles," of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume defines a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" (EHU 10.12), maintaining that belief in such natural laws is grounded in continuous and uniform experience. When testimony alleges the occurrence of a miraculous event, one is effectively confronted with a conflict between two opposing types of evidence: on the one hand, the testimony of uniform experience establishing the laws of nature; on the other, the testimony of specific witnesses concerning a singular event. Therefore, a prudent judge must "proportion his belief to the evidence" (EHU 10.4), weighing which scenario is more probable: that a law of nature has been violated, or that the witnesses have erred,

misjudged, or engaged in deception. On the surface, this appears to constitute a purely epistemological problem. Testimony is no longer situated within the framework of faith and salvation; rather, it necessitates a probabilistic weighing of evidence against likelihood.

A closer reading of Hume's argument shows how the assessment of miracles depends on judgments about the speaking Other. Hume does not debate the possibility of miraculous events *per se*; rather, he examines the witnesses' character, motives, and social circumstances. His analysis highlights humanity's inherent propensity for the marvelous, the subversion of rational judgment by religious enthusiasm, and the progressive amplification and distortion inherent in collective transmission (EHU 10.15–23). In his view, individuals frequently propagate accounts of miracles not out of a pure devotion to truth, but driven by passions, self-interest, and a desire for group identity. For this reason, testimony concerning miracles typically fails to attain the degree of evidence required to outweigh uniform experience. What Hume rejected was thus not testimony *per se*, but rather specific testimonial claims that lack adequate epistemic warrant. Consequently, the rejection of unreliable miracle reports entails a further implication: strong testimony remains fully capable of establishing the credibility of "secular miracles" (extraordinary secular events) [23] (p. 42).

Hume's two thought experiments illustrate the role of judgments about witnesses in assessing extraordinary secular events. Toward the end of the section "Of Miracles," Hume presents two thought experiments involving events that appear equally anomalous: first, if all historical records in every language unanimously reported that a total darkness had prevailed worldwide for eight consecutive days beginning on January 1, 1600, Hume argues that philosophers should not doubt this event, but rather accept it as an established fact and seek its physical causes (EHU 10.36). Second, however, even if all historians were to claim that Queen Elizabeth had risen from the dead a month after her passing and resumed her reign, Hume would firmly insist on rejecting such a claim out of hand (EHU 10.37).

From the standpoint of pure natural science or the strict calculus of probabilities, an eight-day global darkness constitutes no less a violation of known natural laws than a person's resurrection from the dead; yet, when confronted with equally extraordinary evidence, Hume arrives at diametrically opposed conclusions. In the secular case of the global darkness, because the witnesses are historians from diverse cultural backgrounds who share no common interests and lack religious enthusiasm, their mutually corroborating testimonies constitute a highly robust form of intersubjective verification, entirely devoid of any motive for deception. In the case of the Queen's resurrection, however, once an event becomes entangled with religious worship and sacred narratives, speakers are inevitably drawn into the illusions of religious enthusiasm, partisan interests, and group identity.

Ultimately, for Hume, the credibility of a proposition rests upon an ethical appraisal of the speaker's state of mind and social relations—that is, a psychological and moral judgment concerning the speaking Other. In this process, cognitive judgment also involves an ethical appraisal of the Other's character. The historian of science Steven Shapin corroborates this underlying structure in *A Social History of Truth*: within seventeenth-century epistemology, the epistemic reliability of testimony was fundamentally grounded in the "moral character" of the witness and their network of social relations, with such reliability being ultimately guaranteed by the figure of the "gentleman" [24] (pp. 68–70).

4. The Limits of Epistemological Reconstruction and the Hermeneutical Problem of Testimony

4.1. *The Reconstruction of the Epistemological Genealogy and Its Limits*

Read through the question of testimonial knowledge, the three authors occupy contrasting positions. Plato's demand for direct apprehension restricts the epistemic standing

of testimony. Augustine gives belief grounded in authority a place in the pursuit of understanding. Hume locates testimony's justificatory force in experience. These differences provide a basis for the historical comparison developed by contemporary epistemology. In challenging the reductionist account, Coady, Burge, and Adler emphasize testimony's irreducibility, its *prima facie* epistemic entitlement, and its role in the social transmission of knowledge. Their arguments explain why testimony deserves a place alongside other sources of knowledge. The historical readings also show that this question intersects with concerns about truth, authority, and relations between persons.

The continuity established by this genealogy depends on the question guiding the reconstruction: how does testimony give rise to justified belief, and under what conditions can that belief constitute knowledge? This question allows discussions from different periods to be compared in terms of testimony's cognitive function. It draws attention to the acquisition, transmission, and preservation of knowledge beyond individual experience. The comparison is philosophically useful, but it does not establish that the classical texts share this question as their primary concern.

A retrospective philosophical reconstruction must therefore distinguish the question it brings to a text from the question the text itself addresses. In the readings developed here, Plato examines how discourse can lead toward truth, Augustine asks how faith makes understanding possible, and Hume considers the credibility of reports within religious argument. Their treatment of testimony takes its significance from these settings. Attending to them makes it possible to assess what the epistemological genealogy preserves and what it leaves less visible.

The comparison also identifies a connection that runs through these differences. In each reading, the credibility of testimony requires consideration of the person whose word is accepted. Plato asks whether the speaker is oriented toward truth and remains "worthy before the gods"; Augustine places belief within relations of religious authority; Hume examines witnesses' honesty, judgment, and social circumstances. These accounts give different grounds for trust, but they all direct attention beyond the content of the statement to the relation in which it is offered. This connection provides the point of departure for the question of intersubjective understanding.

4.2. From Propositional Verification to Intersubjective Understanding

The historical readings do not place interpersonal relations outside epistemology. The accounts of assurance, trust, and second-personal reasons discussed in Section 3 already make those relations central to testimonial knowledge. The issue concerns the explanatory role they are given. Reductionist and anti-reductionist accounts ask under what conditions a hearer is justified in accepting testimony. The present comparison asks what may be overlooked when those conditions become the sole framework for interpreting the classical texts. A speaker's authority or responsibility may help explain why a belief is warranted while also mattering to how the hearer understands the act of testimony. These aspects of the relation need to be considered together.

When epistemology conceptualizes testimony as a mechanism for knowledge transmission, it asks how a hearer can acquire a warranted belief from another person's words. The historical readings also direct attention to the speaker who addresses those words to the hearer. Plato's concern with rhetoric, Augustine's account of authority, and Hume's assessment of witnesses each give that person a role in the interpretation of the statement. In bearing witness, speakers take responsibility for what they say through their identity, judgment, and reputation. Hearers assess the claim in relation to that responsibility. Information may circulate apart from its original source, but understanding an act of testimony can

require attention to who spoke, in what circumstances, and for what reason. This relation raises a question about the meaning of the utterance as an address to another person.

The “over-epistemologization” of testimony does not mean that epistemological inquiries into evidence, reliability, and the justification of knowledge are themselves mistaken. The difficulty arises when “believing someone” is treated as fully explained by “having grounds for believing that p.” Under that assumption, the speaker’s responsibility matters only insofar as it supports the reliability of the statement, and understanding the witness becomes an assessment of an information source. An account may explain why a report warrants belief without explaining what the speaker means to communicate through the experience being recounted. The distinction between “Believe me” and “Please accept this proposition” draws attention to this further task of interpretation. It concerns the explanatory scope of an account, rather than whether it mentions trust or the speaker–hearer relation.

This is also where the problem of intersubjective understanding arises. Understanding a witness requires attention to the speaker’s situation, the reasons for making the statement, the meaning they give to their experience, and the responsibility they assume for their words. Judgments about truth and evidence remain part of this process. Practices such as historical witness, war memoirs, trauma narratives, and religious testimony make the interpretive task particularly visible because they often present an experience through narrative. Establishing the accuracy of the reported events does not by itself explain their significance within that narrative. Hearers who extract only verifiable information may learn facts about an event without yet understanding what the witness is bearing witness to.

The appeal “Believe me” asks the hearer to assess a claim while attending to the experience of the person making it. These tasks can inform one another: understanding the situation may affect the assessment of credibility, while doubts about a report may require a reconsideration of its meaning. Trust matters within this exchange because the witness takes responsibility for speaking and asks another person to respond. A hermeneutical inquiry examines how such a response becomes an act of understanding. The historical analysis leads to this question by showing how testimony takes different forms within the pursuit of truth, the practice of faith, and the evaluation of witnesses.

5. Conclusions

The readings of Plato, Augustine, and Hume show why the epistemological genealogy of testimony deserves reconsideration. It connects discussions that arose within different philosophical and religious settings by asking how testimony can yield knowledge. That comparison remains useful, but its continuity is partly the result of the question imposed upon the texts. Plato’s concern with truthful discourse, Augustine’s account of faith and understanding, and Hume’s scrutiny of witnesses each give testimony a significance that cannot be captured by placing it at one stage in the development of testimonial justification.

A common difficulty emerges from these differences: accepting what a person says involves judgments about the person as well as the statement. Contemporary theories of assurance and trust already examine this relation. The historical analysis asks how its meaning changes when testimony is considered within the particular concerns of each text. It also brings into view a distinction between establishing grounds for belief and understanding what a witness is bearing witness to. This distinction gives the problem of intersubjective understanding a more specific basis than a general opposition between epistemology and hermeneutics.

The further question is how a hearer comes to understand an experience presented through another person’s words. Evidence remains necessary for assessing the report, while interpretation considers the speaker’s situation and the significance of what is re-

counted. Trust and responsibility matter because the witness addresses a claim to someone whose response is part of the testimonial encounter. The contribution of the historical inquiry is to identify this problem and show how it arises from the relation between testimony and knowledge. It provides a basis for examining the conditions of intersubjective understanding within a hermeneutics of testimony.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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