
Assessing a Speaker's Reliability Falls short of Providing an Argument

A Reply to Marius F. Jung

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When confronted with a speaker's assertion, her addressee can either fulfill the speaker's informative intention and accept the new belief or not. If he does, he can either accept the new belief on the sole basis of the speaker's authority or not. If not, then the addressee can examine the reliability of the speaker's assertion. If he does, then he can either check the content of the speaker's assertion with the contents of his own beliefs or scrutinize the speaker herself as the source of the novel information. If the latter, then he can either examine the speaker's epistemic competence in the relevant domain of discourse or the speaker's moral benevolence (or both). None of the above processes amounts to the addressee producing an argument, let alone an *ad hominem* argument. Only if the speaker offers an argument to back her assertion could the addressee commit an *ad hominem* counterargument in his attempt at rebutting the speaker's.

Keywords

Argument | Assessment of the reliability of a speaker's assertion | Authority | Benevolence | Competence | Fulfilling the speaker's informative intention | Knowledge

In my paper, I probed the gap between the Gricean approach and Millikan's approach to human communicative agency. In particular, I argued in favor of the Gricean separability thesis, i.e., the thesis that the process whereby an addressee fulfills an agent's communicative intention (by understanding or recognizing her informative intention) is distinct from the process whereby the addressee further fulfills (if and when he does) the agent's informative intention (by accepting either a new belief or a new desire for action). I am grateful to Marius F. Jung for his valuable comments on my paper, in which he tries to offer positive suggestions to-

wards bridging the gap between the Gricean separability thesis and (social) epistemology.

In particular, I agree with Marius F. Jung that the issues of whether and to what extent a communicative agent's testimony should or can be assessed as reliable and justified, and thereby construed as knowledge (and not as mere opinion) by her recipient, are of fundamental importance. I also agree with him that it is worthwhile to try and bridge the gap between the psychological investigation of the process whereby an addressee assesses the reliability of a speaker's testimony and the major divide between the reductionist and the anti-reduction-

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ist perspectives in the epistemology of testimony. However, I still want to resist using the particular bridge (or bridges) Jung is building for me. In the following, I want to briefly explain why.

First of all, let us be clear that what we are dealing with here is the addressee's basic epistemic task of assessing the reliability of a communicative agent's (the speaker's) *testimony* or *assertion*, i.e., utterances with truth-conditional contents, because only assertions can be assessed for their reliability or believability. Only a speaker's assertions, not a speaker's requests, can directly enlarge her addressee's knowledge of the world. For the purpose of the discussion of Jung's epistemological project, we should simply ignore addressees' responses to speakers' utterances of requests, i.e., of utterances that lack truth-conditional contents. (I ignore here the fact that a speaker's request may enlarge an addressee's knowledge of the speaker's own character traits.)

Secondly, as I understand it, Jung would like to directly link the investigation of the addressee's task of assessing the reliability of a speaker's assertion to the dispute between the reductionist and the anti-reductionist perspective in the epistemology of testimony. I will reconstruct Jung's basic strategy by means of the six following assumptions.

- He construes the addressee's overall process of assessment of the reliability of a speaker's assertion as an *argument*.
- As I understand it, he also accepts Sperber et al.'s (2010) view that the overall process whereby an addressee assesses the reliability of a speaker's assertion can be divided into two component processes: the assessment of the *authority* of the speaker (who is the *source* of the testimony) and the assessment of the *content* of the speaker's assertion.
- He further focuses on the addressee's assessment of the *authority* of the speaker as the source of the testimony, at the expense of the assessment of the content of the speaker's assertion.

- He links the addressee's assessment of the authority of the speaker as the source of the testimony to *ad hominem arguments*.
- He draws a distinction between local and global *ad hominem* arguments.
- Finally, he argues that only *local*, not global, *ad hominem* arguments are valid methods whereby an addressee can assess the reliability of the speaker's assertion.

I want mainly to take issue with Jung's very first assumption: when assessing a speaker's assertion, the addressee is evaluating the reliability or believability of her utterance. He is *not* arguing with her and therefore not producing an *ad hominem argument*. (Construing the addressee's process of appraisal as an *attack* against the speaker seems far-fetched to me.) In accordance with Jung's second assumption (at least, on my reconstruction of his train of thought), the addressee's appraisal can in turn be seen as a two-fold process: the addressee can focus on either the *content* or the *source* of the speaker's utterance (or both). If the former, then the addressee's task can be construed as a *consistency* check: he checks the compatibility of the truth of the speaker's assertion with the truths of a relevant sub-set of his own beliefs. In the latter case, he scrutinizes some of the speaker's relevant moral or "personal" properties (to use Jung's own phrase). In particular, he will assess the personal authority of the speaker along two main dimensions: her epistemic competence (or knowledge) about the relevant domain of discourse and her moral honesty, i.e., her benevolence towards him.

Of course, the addressee's assessment of the speaker's reliability along these two dimensions is an inferential process, which builds on the addressee's beliefs about both the content of the speaker's assertion and the speaker's personal authority. In an informal sense, it is a reasoning process. But I want to resist the view that this process should be construed as an *argument*, let alone as an *ad hominem* argument. As Sperber et al. (2010) and Mercier & Sperber (2011) have interestingly argued (no pun intended), to *argue* is to try and cause an addressee to accept a new belief (to endorse the truth of

some proposition), by providing explicit *reasons* for it, i.e., by construing it as the *conclusion* of a set of premises from which it derives either deductively or inductively. In fact, arguments are devices used by a speaker in order to try to *overcome* her addressee's reluctance to fulfill her informative intention (i.e., his reluctance to accept a new belief in accordance with her informative intention), on the *sole* grounds of her authority. If so, then speakers (communicative agents) argue, but an addressee doesn't: an addressee *evaluates* the speaker's argument. Of course, an addressee who disagrees with a speaker's argument in favor of some proposition P can turn into a speaker and offer *counter-arguments* to try to cause his opponent to *change her mind* about the truth of P.

1 Conclusion

When a speaker makes an assertion, she commits herself to the truth of some proposition. She thereby knowingly takes the risk that her addressee examines the reliability of her assertion by either checking the content of the asserted proposition or by scrutinizing her epistemic and moral authority. The addressee's choice is to either fulfill the speaker's communicative intention or not. She can further do it on the sole ground of the speaker's authority or not. As I see it, the issue of whether the addressee could *wrong* the speaker by committing some epistemic injustice towards her cannot arise in the process whereby the addressee assesses the reliability of the speaker's mere assertion of P. It can only arise if and when the speaker offers some explicit *argument* in favor of proposition P, in the reasoning process whereby the addressee evaluates the speaker's explicit argument in favor of P, i.e., the link between P and the premises selected by the speaker to justify P. Only then could the addressee produce an *ad hominem* counter-argument (either local or global) meant to successfully or unsuccessfully rebut the speaker's argument for P.

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