

**ON THE DEEPER PURPOSES OF TESTIMONY**

**A philosophical study of the relationship between  
testimony and the emergence of mind**

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## STATEMENT OF SOURCES

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Peter. H. Bennett

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*for my parents*

***Carole Ann Bennett***

*and*

***Robert (Robin) Frederick Bennett***

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues for the truth of two fundamental premises: that testimony is the primary source of knowledge in human beings, and that testimony accounts for the emergence and formation of human minds.

The thesis argues that the human ability to *perceive as...*, *to remember as...*, and *to infer as...*, is due to the say-so of others. All human beings, in virtue of being sentient beings, are able to experience both the external world and their own private states of consciousness, this work contends, however, that our ability to *experience as...* is a consequence of our emergence in a world of epistemic transactions and encounters, the most basic of which are explicated by the epistemological notion of testimony. The work argues, then, that we live in an interpreted world – a world interpreted by those who have gone before us.

The thesis argues further, that the world-view that is built within us as a consequence of the sayings of others, induces and forms human minds. The work makes a strong commitment to the Kantian categories and that philosopher's thesis of Transcendental Idealism. On the shoulders of the Kantian *a priori*, however, the dissertation argues that the formation of human doxastic structures is due to what one's epistemic elders say about what *is*. As such, the thesis seeks to establish a fundamental link between ontology, epistemology, and the concept of mind.

The work proposes a view of the concept of truth that synthesises the Correspondence Theory of Truth, the Coherence Theory of Truth, with a theory of meaning – I name this synthesis a Unified Theory of Truth. Extensive consideration is given to the concept of evidence and the role of trust in epistemic transactions.

The work concludes with a consideration of the possibility that human beings may be able to have *experiences as...* that transcend the ways of 'seeing' that are due to testimony. An explanatory theory is posited that the writings and testimonies of mystics provide evidence that human beings are capable of meaningful experiences which cannot be accommodated by the conceptual structures that otherwise make meaning possible.

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The dissertation is argued in seven chapters and is constructed thus:

## **Chapter One**

The thesis is stated in four premises:

1. that the testimony of others, with respect to what *is the case* (or may be the case), is the primary source of our beliefs about what *is the case* (or may be the case)
2. that the testimony of others provides adequate relevant grounds for one to claim to know what is the case
3. that education is testimony
4. that the formation and emergence of mind is due to testimony

Significant presuppositions are identified and discussed. A brief argument in support of the thesis is posited. Reference is made to the evolution of the argument and the overall structure and organisation of the project is elucidated.

## **Chapter Two**

The second chapter is dedicated to a detailed and extensive analysis of epistemic justification. I argue that the ‘evidence condition’ of the tripartite analysis of propositional knowledge is sometimes misapplied by those who argue that its function is to verify propositions. I argue that its function is to justify beliefs and that it does not verify *that p* – the evidence condition ‘tracks’ the belief condition, not the truth condition. I also examine the concept of evidence itself.

## **Chapter Three**

A detailed examination of the concepts of ‘testimony’, ‘epistemic dependence’ and ‘epistemic independence’ is undertaken. I argue for the centrality and primacy of testimony in the formation of beliefs and subsequently one’s doxastic structures. I argue that testimony plays a fundamental role in the process of education and that this fact points to its significance and importance in epistemic transactions and the emergence of rational and self-reflective minds.

## **Chapter Four**

In the fourth chapter I advert to the difficulty encountered in (a) embracing a strong commitment to intellectual autonomy and (b) accepting the say-so of others on trust. In the light of this observation, I undertake a linguistic conceptual analysis of the concept of trust and then examine the role trust plays in the acquisition of beliefs. I argue that the concept of trust does not exclude critical appraisal, but that when one trusts, one must be disposed to act in a certain way. I argue that although trust does play a fundamental role in formation of beliefs induced by the say-so of others, this does not make impossible critical appraisal of the attestations of others.

## Chapter Five

In this chapter I note my agreement with other philosophers that testimony is the speech-act of attesting, but put up an argument that it is also the speech-act of informing. In consequence I undertake an analysis of the concept of information and examine the mechanisms and processes which are at work that enable 'bits' to become information for an entity or system. I argue that because testimony is the speech-act of informing, it is involved in the actual *formation* of human minds and, therefore, that we can attribute to testimony a deeper purpose than merely attesting to certain states of affairs. I argue that testimony builds, for human beings, a world-view and that it plays a fundamental role in how we come to interpret the experience of being.

## Chapter Six

In the sixth and penultimate chapter I develop my thoughts on the relationship between *a priori* understandings, testimony, and meaning. I argue that there is a logical relationship between belief acquisition, meaning, and the emergence of fully developed human minds. In this chapter I give consideration to the possibility of thought, belief, and the existence of mind in non-human animals and pre-linguistic humans. I argue that there are good reasons to believe that non-human animals think and maybe develop understandings, but that the possession of mind, in the sense that one can be *mindful* and therefore attach meaning to experience and be conscious of self, is limited to human beings. I underwrite this view by adverting to the centrality of testimony within the human condition.

## Chapter Seven

In the final chapter of this dissertation I move to a more speculative mode of philosophising and consider whether or not there may be *meaningful* human experiences which are not interpreted through the conceptual schema acquired as a consequence of the say-so of others. I undertake this speculation by examining the testimony of those who claim to have perceived

God directly and those who seek to speak of purported mystical experiences. I also consider some counter-arguments to my thesis that have not been examined in previous chapters. I conclude that there may be meaningful experiences for human beings that lie beyond interpretation and that concepts such as 'ineffability' point to our attempts to speak of experiences which transcend our doxastic structures.

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