Epistemic Dependence in Testimonial Belief, in the Classroom and Beyond

SANFORD GOLDBERG

1. THE CORE ISSUE

The process of education, and in particular that involving very young children, often involves students’ taking their teachers’ word on a good many things. At the same time, good education at every level ought to inculcate, develop, and support students’ ability to think for themselves. How should we think of these two things as forming part of a coherent pedagogical package? For reasons that will emerge, I will call the challenge of responding to this question the ‘Epistemic Dependence (ED) challenge’.

The ED challenge is a challenge because of the tension that exists between (i) the very young child’s massive dependence on her teachers, and (ii) the aim of education to free students to think for themselves. The tension would seem to be this: insofar as teachers aim to develop and support the child’s intellectual autonomy, it seems curious that the process of pedagogy relies so heavily on the child’s (apparent) lack of intellectual autonomy in the trust she exhibits towards her teachers throughout the process. To be sure, as the child matures, she is more critical in her extension of trust. Even so, the older child’s trust dispositions remain susceptible to certain kinds of exploitation to which an adult’s trust is not. How can we accommodate these facts into an account of good pedagogy—one that gives pride of place to the aim of inculcating students’ intellectual autonomy? This is the ED challenge.

My goal in what follows is to address the ED challenge. I aim to establish two main claims. First, while there may be some tension in the combination of (i) and (ii), this tension amounts to an insurmountable problem for good pedagogy—as opposed to something to be managed in the pedagogical process itself—only on a too-stringent understanding of what is involved in intellectual autonomy. Second,
once we see this, we will be in a position to endorse a natural view about how to square (i) and (ii).

I will proceed as follows. I begin by underscoring what I see as the epistemological ‘ideal’ that lies behind a very natural understanding of intellectual autonomy (Section 2). I call this ‘Cartesian Epistemic Autonomy’, or CEA. Following this, I argue against CEA as an ideal. The assumption of CEA as an ideal renders the ED challenge insoluble, since CEA itself forces us to reject the hypothesis that cognitively immature children can acquire knowledge through testimony (Section 3), and this cost is prohibitive (Section 4). I then develop an alternative conception of intellectual autonomy, on which such autonomy is compatible with a kind of epistemic dependence on others (Section 5). And while this dependence is seen most dramatically in the case of the cognitively immature child, it persists in somewhat modified forms throughout human life.

2. CARTESIAN EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY

It is easy to appreciate why many have thought that there is a tension between the sort of dependence students (especially very young ones) have on their teachers, on the one hand, and the pedagogical aim of inculcating student independent-mindedness, on the other. Some theorists may fear that this tension poses an insurmountable problem for any account of good pedagogy. However, I believe that such a fear is based on a too-demanding, if initially tempting, conception of intellectual autonomy. In this section I describe that tempting, though ultimately unacceptable, conception.

On the conception in question, cognitively healthy, mature humans are represented as epistemically autonomous subjects. An epistemically autonomous subject is one who judges and decides for herself, where her judgements and decisions are reached on the basis of reasons which she has in her possession, where she appreciates the significance of these reasons, and where (if queried) she could articulate the bearing of her reasons on the judgement or decision in question. I will call reasons of this sort ‘fully autonomous’.

This conception of humans as epistemically autonomous subjects goes hand-in-hand with a certain picture of epistemic assessment. According to this picture, the subject’s own fully autonomous reasons constitute the only material to be assessed in assessing the (epistemic) well-supportedness of the decision, judgement, or belief. In particular, nothing beyond the goodness of these reasons has any bearing on how (epistemically) well-supported her judgement, decision, or belief is.
As a corollary, the epistemically autonomous subject counts as having acquired \textit{knowledge}—as opposed to having formed a merely true judgement or a merely true belief—only if the judgement or belief was formed on the basis of an appropriately strong fully autonomous reason (or set of such reasons).

I will speak of a subject as \textit{completely} epistemically autonomous when she is no way dependent on others for the knowledge that she has. One who is completely epistemically autonomous acquires all of her knowledge at first hand. No human being is completely epistemically autonomous in this sense. But a slight complication to the conception I am describing will enable us to accommodate the fact that we depend on others for a good deal of what we know. To this end, let us distinguish between \textit{informational} and \textit{epistemic} dependence. Roughly speaking, a subject, H, \textit{informationally} depends on another subject, S, when H would not have had access to the truth of a given proposition were it not for S’s having told her. To illustrate: I wasn’t at yesterday’s ballgame, so if someone hadn’t told me who won, I wouldn’t have had access to that truth. Now, the mere fact of H’s informational dependence on S does not yet determine anything about the \textit{epistemic goodness} of the belief H forms through accepting S’s telling. On that score the key question is whether the epistemic goodness of H’s testimonial belief is to be determined exclusively in terms of the epistemic goodness of \textit{H’s own reasons}—in particular, the epistemic goodness of those reasons H has for regarding S as credible on this occasion. If so, then we can speak of H as \textit{epistemically independent} of, even as she is informationally dependent on, her source.² In short, the conception of humans as epistemically autonomous subjects can allow that each of us is \textit{informationally} dependent on others; its core commitment, rather, is to a standard of epistemic assessment on which each of us is \textit{epistemically independent} of others.

It might be helpful to present the resulting picture in a slightly different way. According to the picture on offer, it is compatible with one’s intellectual autonomy that one believes something because another said so. What intellectual autonomy (so conceived) requires, rather, is that when one does so, one must have fully autonomous reasons for regarding the attestation as reliable. In effect, the present picture demands that the intellectually autonomous subject have an attitude of \textit{a priori} agnosticism regarding others’ say-so. On this view, the fact that another person said so, by itself, has no epistemic significance whatsoever: it does not and cannot provide any support to the subject’s belief in what was said. Rather, the epistemically autonomous subject regards all testimony as having the status of \textit{acceptable}
only if she herself has adequate, fully autonomous reasons for regarding the attestation as reliable. To fail to live up to this standard—to accept another’s say-so under conditions in which one does not have such reasons—is, according to the conception we are describing, to fail to be intellectually autonomous.

I will use the phrase Cartesian Epistemic Autonomy (‘CEA’) to designate the foregoing conception of intellectual autonomy. CEA is a tempting conception of intellectual autonomy for at least two related reasons. First, the claim that none of us is ever epistemically dependent on another can seem to be a piece of common-sense. For how can the epistemic goodness of your belief ever depend on facts about another person—for example, the reasons or evidence she has? But there is a second, related reason why CEA is a tempting conception of intellectual autonomy. It is tempting to suppose that we are, each of us, masters of the epistemic goodness of our own system of belief, at least in the following sense: truth (and anti-Gettierization) aside, the epistemic goodness of a belief can seem to be a matter of how well the subject herself responded to her reasons (or evidence), and nothing more. In particular, when it comes to how well you are doing, epistemically speaking, it is not the case that you are ever dependent on how any other subjects responded to their reasons or evidence: such facts about other people are in principle always irrelevant to the epistemic assessment of your own beliefs. Insofar as this too appears to be a piece of common-sense, CEA can strike us as nothing more than a theoretical gloss on these aspects of common-sense.

3. THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF TESTIMONY: THE CASE OF VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

If your conception of intellectual autonomy is CEA, then the ED challenge is going to take a particularly extreme form. In particular, CEA is incompatible with a key aspect of the educational process itself—namely, the acquisition of knowledge through the acceptance of the teacher’s say-so. After bringing this result out in this section, I argue that for this reason we ought to question our commitment to CEA itself.

My claim here is that CEA undermines the prospects for a student’s acquiring testimonial knowledge through accepting her teacher’s say-so. To see why this is so, it will be helpful to assume that knowledge requires true beliefs formed on the basis of (epistemically) good reasons. If we combine the ‘good reasons’ condition on knowledge with CEA itself, we get the following necessary condition on Testimonial Knowledge:
CEA-TK A subject S knows that p through testimony that p only if (a) S has reasons $\psi$ for regarding the observed testimony as credible,\(^5\) (b) S appreciates the significance of $\psi$, (c) S can articulate the bearing of $\psi$ on her belief that p, and (d) $\psi$ are (epistemically) good reasons with respect to the proposition that p.

My claim will be that if CEA-TK is true, very young (cognitively immature) children will be incapable of acquiring testimonial knowledge—whether from their parents, their guardians, or their teachers.\(^6\)

To bring this out, I want to offer the following case:

ICE CREAM Two-year-old Sally is told by Father that there is ice cream for dessert tonight. (Father speaks from knowledge.) Sally understands the testimony, accepts Father’s say-so immediately, and so without further ado forms the belief that there is ice cream for dessert tonight. To be sure, Sally’s acceptance is not blind. For example, if Father had made an effort to convey that he was only pretending—had he used unusual gestures while speaking, smiled exaggeratedly, winked, or given some other salient indication of insincerity that Sally recognized—Sally would not have believed him.\(^7\) In addition, if Father had said something ‘silly’—for example, that Fido (their pet dog) is really a giraffe, or that trees walk and talk—Sally would not have believed him.\(^8\) We can add as well that Sally (like young children generally) shows a strong tendency to prefer testimony from people she recognises (such as her siblings, friends, or parents), as well as testimony from those she regards as authorities (such as her preschool teachers, or her babysitters), to testimony from strangers.\(^9\) Still, Sally’s cognitive immaturity, together with her relative paucity of background knowledge,\(^10\) limit her ability to scrutinise the testimonies she observes: she is significantly less discerning than a normal, cognitively healthy adult. (In all of these respects she is a typical, normal, healthy young child.\(^11\))

Now Sally believes her father, and so believes the truth that there is ice cream for dessert tonight; but does this belief of hers constitute knowledge? According to CEA-TK, Sally’s testimonial belief amounts to knowledge only if it satisfies CEA-TK’s conditions (a)-(d). But I want to argue that this necessity claim—that Sally has knowledge only if she satisfies CEA-TK (a)-(d)—is false. To do so, I will argue that while Sally’s testimonial belief does amount to knowledge, it fails to satisfy CEA-TK’s conditions (a)-(d).
I submit that Sally knows that there is ice cream for dessert tonight. If we are forced to the conclusion that Sally doesn’t acquire knowledge here, we are likely to be forced to the same conclusion in most or all other cases involving Sally’s reliance on the word of another. Simply put, as a case of a young child’s reliance on testimony, ICE CREAM is about as good as it gets, epistemically speaking: her source is a parent, and hence is someone whom she recognises as both a family member and an authority; the source’s testimony was knowledgeable; the topic is one on which the source might reasonably be expected (by adults, anyway) to be knowledgeable; as hearer, Sally herself is a cognitively healthy and normal child; and there were no conditions present that would have prompted any reasonable listener to question the source’s credibility. If this case fails to be one in which Sally counts as having acquired knowledge, it is hard to see how there could be any case in which Sally counts as acquiring testimonial knowledge. Since a good deal (and arguably most) of the knowledge a young child has comes from testimony, the result of denying that Sally knows in this case would be substantial scepticism about the extent of Sally’s knowledge. And what goes for Sally goes for any very young (cognitively immature) child.

Even so, Sally’s testimonial belief fails to satisfy CEA-TK’s conditions (a)-(d). Some will question whether Sally satisfies conditions (a)-(c): can a child of Sally’s cognitive immaturity really be said to ‘have’ reasons whose bearing on her belief she appreciates and can articulate? But in the spirit of concessiveness I want to grant that she can be ascribed reasons. My claim is rather that whatever reasons we might plausibly ascribe to Sally in ICE CREAM, in the hope of showing that she satisfies (a)-(c), these reasons will not enable her to satisfy condition (d)—at least not on any plausible reading of ‘good reasons’ on which such reasons are the sort that can support claims to knowledge. To see this, consider the sort of reason(s) we might credit her with having. Presumably, these reasons derive from Sally’s counterfactual sensitivity to certain forms of testimonial unreliability. Simply put, had Father’s testimony been obviously insincere or patently false, Sally wouldn’t have accepted what he said. We might package this counterfactual sensitivity on Sally’s part as a reason, or a collection of reasons, that Sally has for regarding Father’s testimony as credible. These reasons are: that Father was the speaker; and that his testimony was not defective in either of these ways. (Or, to put a more positive spin on it, perhaps the reason is that Father’s testimony was both sincere and not obviously false.) Now I want to claim that Sally does not satisfy (d) because these reasons are not substantial enough to underwrite Sally’s claim to knowledge.
Sally’s reasons do not constitute a basis sufficient to underwrite the claim that she knows (through Father’s testimony) that there will be ice cream for dessert tonight. We can bring this out as follows. Father, being like any other ordinary adult human being, is such that not all of his sincere statements are true. What is more, on (virtually) every occasion on which he would testify (sincerely but) falsely, the falsity of his statement would elude his two-year-old daughter. But for this very reason we can say that, had the present case been one in which Father’s testimony was sincere but false, Sally herself would have reacted as she did in ICE CREAM: she would have believed him. But this shows that she would have had precisely the same reasons for accepting Father’s testimony in a case in which his testimony was sincere but false, as she has for accepting his testimony in the actual case (where that testimony was both sincere and true). But if she would have had precisely the same reasons for accepting Father’s testimony whether or not Father spoke truly, despite the fact that Father (being fallible) speaks falsely often enough to make this something to which a responsible hearer ought to be sensitive, then Sally’s reasons themselves are not strong enough to underwrite Sally’s claim to know. And this makes clear that even if we do credit Sally with having such reasons for accepting Father’s testimony, and even if we allow that Sally appreciates the bearing of these reasons on what she believes, and that she can articulate them if queried, still, Sally’s having these reasons does not suffice to render her true testimonial belief knowledge.

At this point an obvious rejoinder will have occurred to the defender of CEA. Sally is relying on Father, and, while it is true that he sometimes speaks (sincerely but) falsely, he wouldn’t have said something false to Sally. In particular, he is more careful with the claims he makes to his two-year-old daughter, and more careful still when those claims pertain to dessert!

Though attractive in many ways, this response is not in the spirit of CEA itself: it appeals to facts which, by the lights of CEA itself, can have no bearing on the epistemic assessment of Sally’s beliefs. After all, the facts in question are facts about Father and his speech dispositions towards his daughter. While Sally is so positioned that she can in effect take advantage of these aspects of Father’s speech dispositions towards her, she herself is unaware of any of this. And if she is not aware of any of this, then none of these facts can count among the reasons that she has (and whose bearing on her beliefs she appreciates and can articulate). In short, she is in no position to satisfy CEA-TK’s conditions (a)-(d). But then, for the reasons given above, the conclusion stands: given CEA-TK, Sally does not count as acquiring knowledge through Father’s testimony.
We can now generalise this result in two ways.

First, we can generalise beyond the ICE CREAM case, to speak of very young (cognitively immature) children and their sources more broadly. The point here is that if CEA undermines testimonial knowledge in a case as good as that of Sally and her Father, then it will undermine testimonial knowledge in most or all cases in which a very young child relies on another’s testimony. This is because the relevant features of the case that generate this result have to do with the sorts of reasons such children can be credited with having. I argued above that, in the case of Sally and Father, reasons of the sort that are available to a young child like Sally were not sufficient to underwrite knowledge; and I submit that a corresponding argument could be given in any case in which a cognitively immature child relies on the word of a speaker whose fallibility is ordinary.

Second, while my case against CEA so far has rested on the assumption that knowledge requires good reasons, we can also generalise this result so as to dismiss any background assumptions about the nature of knowledge. For whatever one’s views regarding the materials required for knowledge, and whatever one’s views on the conditions on testimonial knowledge in particular, the fact remains that whether Sally’s belief satisfies these necessary conditions on knowledge depends not just on Sally’s reasons (alternatively: the reliability of her cognitive processes), but also on those reasons possessed by Father (alternatively: the reliability of his testimony). Even if we allow that cognitively immature children are not blind consumers of testimony, the materials that they contribute to the support of their own testimonial beliefs—their reasons, the reliability of their cognitive processes, etc.—do not contribute enough, by themselves, to support the claim to knowledge. Since CEA requires precisely this sort of epistemic independence, CEA itself is problematic.

4. TESTIMONY AND TESTIMONIAL KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY EDUCATION

As an argument against CEA, the case from ICE CREAM in Section 3 might be represented as follows:

(1) Sally knows (through accepting Father’s testimony) that there is ice cream for dessert tonight; but
(2) if CEA is true, Sally does not know (through accepting Father’s testimony) that there is ice cream for dessert tonight; so
(3) CEA is false.
In the previous section I spent most of my efforts defending (2). But proponents of CEA might think to respond to this argument by rejecting (1). While I did provide some argument for (1) in the previous section, perhaps proponents of CEA will think to redouble their efforts to deny (1). In this section I reinforce my argument on this score, by providing two programmatic reasons in defence of claims like (1).

Before doing so, it is worth bearing in mind what the proponent of CEA must do, if she aims to defend CEA by rejecting (1). We will be in a position to offer an argument like that of (1)-(3) so long as there is a single case in which a very young child knows through testimony, but fails to satisfy CEA-TK’s conditions (a)-(d). So it is not sufficient to reject (1); the defender of CEA must hold that there is never a case in which a version of (1) and (2) both hold. That is, the defender of CEA must hold that there is never a case in which a young child knows through testimony, yet where the child fails to satisfy CEA-TK’s conditions (a)-(d). Now if my case for generalising from ICE CREAM were sound, it would show that, given CEA and the (undeveloped) capacities and (limited) background information of the typical cognitively immature child, no such child ever has reasons that are substantial enough by themselves to underwrite knowledge. In that case, the defender of CEA who hopes to respond to my argument by rejecting (1) must reject not only (1), but also every other claim to the effect that some cognitively immature child knows through testimony. In short, the defender of CEA must reject the very idea that cognitively immature children acquire knowledge through testimony. I contend that this rejection is too costly, and in two ways.

It should be uncontroversial that teaching of any sort aims at getting students to learn—to learn the relevant facts, skills, or what-have-you. It should be uncontroversial as well that when the teaching in question aims at teaching facts, it aims at getting students to know those facts. Insofar as pedagogy which aims at teaching facts does not eventuate in the students’ acquisition of factual knowledge, then, to just that extent the pedagogical process itself can be said to have failed to attain one of its aims. Herein lies a first cost associated with the move to defend CEA by rejecting the idea of testimonial knowledge in early childhood. To make this move is to imply that early childhood educators systematically fail to attain one of the aims of education—the inculcation of factual knowledge in its students.

But there is a second cost associated with the move to defend CEA by rejecting the idea of testimonial knowledge in early childhood. When we represent someone as knowing that such-and-such is the case, we represent her as having met all relevant epistemic standards
in arriving at her belief that such-and-such is the case. Correspondingly, when we represent someone as failing to know, despite having a true belief, we represent her as failing to have met all relevant epistemic standards. So insofar as the proponent of CEA rejects the idea of testimonial knowledge in early childhood, our proponent implies that very young children systematically fail to meet epistemic standards whenever they form beliefs through accepting others’ testimony. And this fails to do justice to the children themselves. For while it is true that their reasons, and their appreciation of and ability to articulate those reasons, fail to underwrite their claim to know, this is no strike against their performance as believing subjects. On the contrary, in the circumstances in which they find themselves e.g. when in school, their dispositions to trust give rise to beliefs that are true significantly more often than not. Indeed, it is precisely the young child’s disposition to trust that enables her to acquire the knowledge she will subsequently employ as she grows and becomes a more critical thinker. No doubt, the fact that young children’s disposition to trust (when employed in school settings) has this happy outcome is not to be traced to their capacity to discern reliable from unreliable testimony. Rather, the fact that their trust gives rise to a preponderance of true beliefs can be traced to the fact that they are employing this (underdeveloped) capacity in an environment that is, and has been structured to be, highly friendly. In particular, classroom interactions are highly structured, with the teacher at the centre of a good many (if not all) of the learning activities; the set of people who have access to the children, and the other informational materials available in the classroom, are both highly restricted (and vetted in advance by relevant adult authorities); the informational exchanges involving the children in the classroom are monitored by the teacher(s), who correct and redirect these interactions as they perceive the need to do so; and so forth. In such settings, the children’s disposition to trust, though still immature, actually aids them: since the environment is a friendly one, their more trusting nature results in many true beliefs (and not as many false beliefs as one might fear). For just this reason, regarding the child as failing to live up to relevant epistemic standards seems wrongheaded in the extreme. Once again, CEA delivers the wrong verdict.

Might the defender of CEA reply by arguing that whether a subject’s reasons are good enough to support a claim to knowledge itself depends on the nature of the context in which she acquires those reasons? If so, the defender of CEA might allow that the young child does acquire testimonial knowledge while in the classroom, since the reasons she has, though not good enough to underwrite her claim to
know if she were in an ordinary adult setting, are good enough to underwrite her claim to know in the classroom.

But while such a reply might thus seem attractive, the proponent of CEA ought to reject it, for two reasons.

First, this reply amounts to a highly unattractive kind of epistemic contextualism. The proposal is that a young child’s reasons for accepting a piece of testimony are good enough, e.g. when he is in school, but not good enough when he is on the playground (unsupervised by teachers). But do we really want to say that little Frank knows (when he is in class) that school buses are yellow, but fails to know this when he is on the playground, or otherwise unsupervised? Or is the view rather that, because Frank acquired these reasons in the classroom, where they were good enough to support his claim to knowledge, these reasons are good enough when he is subsequently on the playground as well? Either way, this proposal runs contrary to a point on which virtually all epistemologists (contextualist and non-contextualists alike) agree, namely, that a subject’s ‘strength of epistemic position’—e.g. the epistemic goodness of her reasons—is not context-sensitive in this way.

Second, not only does the present proposal amount to one or another implausible form of epistemic contextualism, it also seems highly unmotivated in connection with CEA. The proposed move is essentially a recognition of the relevance (to epistemic assessment) of factors having to do with the antics and practices of other people—factors which do not constitute any part of the believing subject’s own epistemic perspective (her beliefs, her reasons, etc.). It is hard to see how this is in the spirit of CEA.

In sum, the idea that cognitively immature children can nevertheless acquire testimonial knowledge is one that plays an important role in how we think about the aims of early childhood education, and it is one that informs the epistemic standards that we bring to bear on very young children themselves. We abandon this idea only at great costs. CEA, which requires us to abandon it, is thus a costly doctrine. Before paying such a price, we ought to see whether we can avoid doing so.

5. AT WHAT Sort OF INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY SHOULD EDUCATION AIM?

Let us take stock. One of the central aims of education is to inculcate, develop, and support students’ capacity to think for themselves. A tempting picture holds that to think for oneself is to depend epistemically only on oneself. This picture derives from a view of epistemic
subjects, CEA, according to which all epistemic subjects are *Cartesian Epistemic Subjects*—subjects whose beliefs are only as epistemically good as the fully autonomous reasons on which those beliefs are based. However, CEA runs into trouble when we consider the dependence of cognitively immature children on their caregivers, parents, and teachers. That this dependence is distinctly epistemic is seen in testimony cases: even on the concessive assumption that cognitively immature children have reasons of their own for regarding their sources as credible, still, these reasons fail to be the sort that can underwrite knowledge. As a result, the cost of insisting on CEA is to deny that such children acquire knowledge (as opposed to merely true belief) through testimony. This is an unhappy result.

In order to see whether we can avoid this result, we must face a new version of the Epistemic Dependence challenge. As initially formulated, the ED challenge was to square (i) the epistemic dependence of very young children on their teachers (and other caregivers), with (ii) the educational aim of getting students to think for themselves. We now see that, all else equal, it would be best to meet this challenge without surrendering the idea that (iii) cognitively immature children can nevertheless acquire testimonial knowledge from their teachers (and other caregivers). We can do so if we reject CEA in favour of an alternative conception of intellectual autonomy.

Before getting to this proposal, however, it is worth noting that there is another, more theoretically conservative way to meet the new version of the ED challenge. The conservative reaction would be to hold on to CEA, but to regard CEA as applying to a more restricted domain—perhaps that of cognitively mature, healthy adult human beings. To see how this does the required job, suppose that CEA applies only of the restricted domain of cognitively mature, healthy adult human beings. Then the proponent of CEA could allow that cognitively immature children fail to have the sort of reasons CEA requires for testimonial knowledge, without having to conclude that therefore they fail to acquire testimonial knowledge. Stronger still, the proponent of CEA might claim that cognitively immature children *do* acquire such knowledge; the proponent of CEA could claim this so long as she endorsed the view that the acquisition of testimonial knowledge requires less of cognitively immature children than it requires of cognitively mature, healthy adults.

Relative to this conservative reaction, the move that I will defend—to reject CEA altogether, and replace it with a different conception of intellectual autonomy—can seem radical. Still, I believe that there are clear reasons for favouring my more radical reaction over the conservative reaction just described. Here I offer three.
The first is a methodological one. All else equal, it is preferable to have one account that covers all epistemic subjects, rather than having a separate account for cognitively immature subjects. (We might think of this as an injunction to favour simple theories over more complicated ones.) The theoretically conservative reaction runs afoul of this methodological stricture, since in effect it offers at least two different accounts of the conditions on testimonial knowledge: one for cognitively immature subjects, and another for cognitively mature subjects. Of course, the methodological principle itself is applicable only if all else is equal: there may be strong independent reasons to favour two distinct accounts. But in the absence of such reasons, we have a first consideration in support of rejecting CEA outright, rather than restricting its domain to cognitively mature subjects.

A second reason in support of rejecting CEA outright, rather than merely restricting its domain to cognitively mature subjects, is that CEA would appear to be false even if we restrict our attention to the domain of cognitively mature subjects. This is a point that has been argued at length elsewhere, so here I will be brief. One claim that has been made on this score is that it is not the hearer’s own reasons, but rather the speaker’s reasons, that determine whether the hearer counts as knowing through testimony (Burge, 1993; Faulkner, 2000; Goldberg, 2006a; Schmitt, 2006). To this a second, weaker claim can be made: whether or not the speaker’s reasons (or the reliability of her testimony) are required to determine whether the hearer knows through accepting the speaker’s testimony, still, these reasons (reliability) enhance the strength of the hearer’s epistemic position, and so should be factored in to a complete epistemic assessment of the hearer’s testimonial belief. Either way, factors beyond those pertaining to the hearer’s own reasons are relevant to the epistemic goodness of her beliefs. CEA is thus a false claim even if we restrict our attention to cognitively mature subjects.

But there is a third reason in support of rejecting CEA altogether, rather than simply restricting its applicability to the ‘cognitively mature’ phase of an epistemic subject’s life: CEA fails to be able to accommodate a striking feature of our (mature) reliance on the word of others. Intuitively, when one relies on another’s say-so, one is depending on her to have had her own epistemic house in order. This is precisely why one is relying on her in the first place: one takes her to have the relevant reasons (or to be relevantly reliable) on the matter on which she just testified. But by the lights of CEA, nothing pertaining to another person is ever relevant to the epistemic standing of one’s own beliefs. Thus it would seem that this striking
feature of our reliance on the word of others cannot be accommodated by CEA.

Still, CEA had one thing going for it: it provided a (natural and tempting) conception of intellectual autonomy, from which we could derive a corresponding standard for assessing whether the educational process succeeded in its aim of getting students to think for themselves. If we reject CEA outright, and so reject both this conception of intellectual autonomy and the corresponding characterisation of what good pedagogy should aim at, what should replace them?

Let us agree that the pedagogical process ought to aim to elicit, support, and develop those capacities that enable the student to think for herself. (While I reject the idea that success in this endeavour is to be understood in CEA’s terms, I do not reject the idea that this is part of the aim of education.) What does this aim look like, and how should we understand successful pedagogy in this respect, once we recognise that students are epistemically dependent on their teachers and other caregivers? Perhaps everyone (proponents of CEA included) can agree on this much: the student who thinks for herself is one who, in the course of forming and revising her attitudes and values, does not ascribe undue weight to the opinions of others or to the role of tradition. Nor should it be controversial to suppose that pedagogical success on this score involves instilling the capacities required to have the appropriately critical distance from the opinions of others. But what it is to ascribe ‘undue’ weight to the opinions of others, or to have a distance from others’ opinions which is ‘appropriately critical’?

Whatever the correct answers may be, they won’t be the answers that CEA would give us. According to CEA, the epistemic ideal at which epistemic subjects ought to be aiming is complete epistemic independence of others. Such independence is assumed in the very standards CEA would have us use in epistemic assessment: only a subject’s own completely autonomous reasons are to be taken into account when assessing the epistemic standing of her beliefs. On this picture, one ascribes undue weight to others’ opinions to the extent that one depends epistemically on them. Further, it would seem that the ‘appropriately critical’ distance from others’ opinions is precisely the sort of a priori agnosticism I described in section 3 above. Simply put, any other attitude towards the say-so of others appears to give undue weight to the opinions expressed, and so would not be ‘appropriately critical’. To be sure, the reasonable proponent of CEA will acknowledge that human subjects cannot always attain this ideal. (That is the lesson from childhood reliance on testimony, as seen above.) But the proponent of CEA will regard this as a regrettable fact about the human condition, rather than a reason to question the ideal
itself. (We will be reminded that something can be an ideal even if it isn’t always, or even regularly, attainable.)

In response, I submit that CEA’s picture amounts to a false epistemic ideal: it is not merely that young children can’t attain this ideal; it is rather that this is not the ideal at which we ought to be aiming even in the maturity of adulthood. To see this, it will be helpful to revisit several of the central lessons of the cognitively immature child’s reliance on testimony. (After doing so I will argue that similar things can be said in connection with mature adults as well.) First: while the cognitively immature child can acquire knowledge through testimony, when she does so, it is not her autonomous reasons, so much as those that are had by the testifier, that render her true belief knowledge. Second: even if we allow that the cognitively immature child has reasons for accepting testimony (whose bearing on her testimonial belief she appreciates), these reasons are not robust enough to protect her from the range of insincerity and incompetence found in the testimonies of the adult world. That she can nevertheless come to acquire knowledge through testimony reflects the epistemic happiness of her classroom or home environment. Third: the ‘happiness’ of her epistemic environment is the result of a good deal of deliberate effort and attentiveness on the part of her teachers and other adult caretakers, about which she is largely (if not wholly) ignorant. In this context, where what we might call the child’s informational environment is the result of a good deal of prior deliberation and is highly regulated and monitored by teachers and other adults, the task the child faces in connection with managing the flow of information is made easier by the friendliness of the school environment.25

I submit that these points, taken together, point to an alternative ideal. The young child, as epistemic subject, is situated in an environment that has been so tailored to enable her epistemic dependence on others to result in her reliable acquisition of true beliefs. At least for her, epistemic independence, far from being an ideal, is such that were she (counterfactually) to aim at it, doing so would dramatically hinder her education. For suppose that epistemic independence were the ideal. In that case, given her cognitive immaturity, the young child would then face one of two unattractive options: either to believe others’ say-so under conditions in which she fails to have sufficiently strong autonomous reasons for acceptance; or to refrain in a systematic way from believing any say-so at all. In the former case, she would be acquiring what by the lights of CEA’s ideal are insufficiently-grounded beliefs—beliefs which fail to be knowledge even when true. In the latter case, she would be depriving herself of a good deal of true information about her world. And so we see that if
CEA’s picture really is an epistemic ideal, the educational process of young children must be seen as a necessary evil.

I suspect that there will be proponents of CEA who do not flinch in acknowledging this much. They will shrug off this result by claiming that children are not ideal epistemic subjects to begin with, so of course the process of educating them will deviate far from the ideal. At the same time, they will insist that the process of education is one in which the distance between what the student is capable of and what the ideal requires is ever narrowed—ideally, to the point where there is no distance whatsoever. This will remain an attractive picture to many.

The only way to dislodge the attractiveness of this picture is to insist that versions of the very points made in connection with cognitively immature children persist into the maturity of adulthood—and indeed last throughout human life. This is precisely what I take to be the case. First: while the mature adult regularly acquires knowledge through testimony, when she does, it is not her own autonomous reasons, but rather those that are had by the testifier, that render her true belief knowledge.26 Second: while the mature subject typically has reasons for accepting testimony (whose bearing on her testimonial belief she appreciates), and while these reasons are often robust enough to protect her from the range of insincerity and incompetence one finds in the testimonies of the adult world, even so, she still relies (in an ineliminable way) on others in her community for enforcement of testimonial norms. Consider the role that others play in ‘policing’ testimonial norms. If every time that one observes what strikes one as false testimony one reacts by raising questions or expressing doubts, then, assuming hearers are broadly knowledgeable and speakers are sensitive to even mild rebuke, this sort of practice will have a dampening effect on the prevalence of unreliable testimonies. In this way, our testimonial environments are ‘cleaner’ than one would predict in the absence of any such practice. And this ‘cleanliness’, in turn, makes the adult’s task of discerning reliable from unreliable testimonies easier than it would be if individual hearers had to rely on nothing beyond their own onboard resources.27 Thus, while the adult’s world is not structured like a grade school classroom, nevertheless adults benefit from the efforts of others in ‘cleaning up’ the testimonial environment. It is of course true that the adult world poses many more epistemic risks and dangers than are found in the typical classroom, and true as well that a good deal of the adult world is not ‘epistemically engineered’ at all. Still—and this is the third parallel between the adult case and the case of the cognitively immature child—there are some adult environments that are engineered so as to be easily exploited for
reliable information. Consider the university, the institute, and the range of professional and scientific associations; the scholarly (peer-reviewed) journal, traditional newsprint media, and respectable book presses; the phenomenon of expertise, and the way expertise is ‘signalled’ to those in need of an expert’s information. Of course, mature adults are often highly self-aware in the way they acquire information in these settings or from these sources; they do so only when they have reasons to regard these settings or sources as providing highly reliable information (under certain recognisable conditions). But in the very same way that a hearer’s reasons for accepting a piece of testimony do not render her testimonial belief knowledgeable even when true, so I submit that a hearer’s reasons for regarding a source as credible do not exhaust the considerations that bear on the rationality of her acceptance. Rather, the context of acceptance is one in which the task of monitoring testimony is itself distributed.28

I submit that these considerations point out the objectionably individualistic character of CEA’s epistemic ideal even for mature adults. Rather than thinking that we ought to be aiming to reduce as much as possible our epistemic dependence on others (with the ultimate goal, where possible, of eliminating this dependence altogether), I submit that our epistemic ideal ought to recognise our ineliminable epistemic dependence on others. Our aim ought to be rather to manage this dependence appropriately. Relatedly, when it comes to getting students to think for themselves, successful pedagogy is success in shaping the students’ local informational environment in such a way as to prepare her to face the sorts of information management challenges29 that are regularly faced in adulthood. The ultimate aim is to gradually increase the difficulty of the information-management challenges the student must confront so that, by the time she reaches adulthood, she will be proficient at this sort of challenge even in the decidedly less friendly adult environments. The aim here is not one of an ever-increasing attempt to eliminate epistemic dependence; it is rather to equip students to manage their dependence in a world in which this dependence has a clear payoff (in the extension of knowledge each of us can acquire) but also exposes us to the threats of manipulation and misinformation.

Still, we might wonder: why should we care that our youth be educated so that they are presented with information-management tasks that are challenging and yet still manageable?30 Among other reasons, the value of this sort of pedagogy can be seen in the role that students play (not merely as consumers of testimony, but also) as producers of testimony. We want students to emerge as reliable informants in their own right;31 and when successful, a process of
pedagogy of this sort offers the twin advantages of achieving this aim in adulthood, while all the while preserving the reliability of the information the children get throughout the process.

I have been highlighting the continuities that exist between the information management tasks that confront the cognitively immature child and those we face in the maturity of adulthood. But there are important differences as well, and perhaps it is good to conclude by acknowledging the most salient of these. Clearly, the cognitive immaturity of early childhood makes very young children less good—in fact, significantly less good—at the information management tasks that arise in the environments in which we adults regularly find ourselves. Thus, even if little Mary (a precocious but still cognitively immature child) invariably succeeds in the very limited version of the information management task she faces in the preschool environment, still, she would fare poorly in information environments that are less highly structured and less well monitored. Here one might worry that my account of intellectual autonomy cannot acknowledge this: insofar as little Mary succeeds in her preschool environment, the objection has it, my account will regard her, implausibly, as highly intellectual autonomous. But this objection assumes that we can assess a subject’s intellectual autonomy without taking into account the range of informational environments in which she can reliably employ her critical capacities to good effect. I submit that we reject this assumption. Rather, insofar as we want to think of the (degree of) intellectual autonomy exhibited by a subject, we should do so against the backdrop of the range of informational environments in which she can reliably manage the information management challenge. For this reason, it would be more apt to reserve the description ‘intellectually autonomous’ to those who have attained the sorts of critical capacities that suffice to enable them to succeed across a wide variety of informational environments. Despite her precociousness, little Mary does not fit that bill. Even so, when an adult does do well on this score, and so is properly described as exhibiting a high degree of intellectual autonomy, this should not cause us to lose track of the fact that such a subject continues to be epistemically dependent on others throughout her adult life—Cartesian ideology to the contrary notwithstanding.

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NOTES

1. See Koenig et al., 2004 and Heyman and Legare, 2005.

2. Strictly speaking, this characterisation of epistemic independence needs to be qualified. It should read: a subject H’s testimonial belief is epistemically independent of her source when, *bracketing the question of truth (and the anti-Gettier condition on knowledge)*, the epistemic goodness of H’s testimonial beliefs is to be determined exclusively in terms of the epistemic goodness of H’s own reasons. However, for ease of exposition I will ignore this qualification in what follows.

3. Although I will restrict my discussion to cognitively immature children, I think similar points hold with respect to older children and even adults as well.

4. As we will see below, similar points can be made even if one thinks that knowledge requires, not good reasons, but reliable belief-forming processes.

5. Strictly speaking, condition (a) should read: (a) S has reasons for believing that p. I am here assuming that in testimony cases, these reasons are reasons to regard the observed testimony as credible.

6. One might worry that any theory that rejects CEA-TK will be overly-liberal in its implications for the extent of testimonial knowledge—i.e. that any such theory will regard as testimonial knowledge many cases that are not cases of testimonial knowledge. I will respond to this sort of worry below; but for a more detailed treatment, see Goldberg and Henderson, 2006 and Goldberg, 2008.

7. According to the developmental psychology literature, preschool children can distinguish, more or less reliably, those speakers who are engaging in obvious story-telling. See Dias and Harris, 1990; Harris, 2002; and Richards and Sanderson, 1999.

8. Children as young as sixteen months react differently to true and false testimony in cases involving the labelling of simple objects; see Koenig and Echols, 2003.

9. Although this sort of discernment of (and differential responses to) various types of testimonies and testifiers is especially striking at the age of six, children do make some distinctions of this sort even earlier. For the literature on this topic, see Baldwin and Moses, 1996; Bar-Tal et al., 1990; Heyman and Legare, 2005; Lutz and Keil, 2002; and Mills and Keil, 2004.

10. Even among children who have initiated the move to a more sceptical trust, the effects of this move are limited by the fact that children typically do not have a great deal of relevant worldly knowledge on which to draw when assessing the likely truth of testimony in real-life cases. The result is that, while the young child may reject false testimony when she has observational knowledge contradicting the testimony (Harris, 2002; Mitchell et al., 1997), in everyday life children often confront testimony regarding whose truth they have no relevant first-hand information (Koenig et al., 2004).

11. According to the developmental literature, it is not until late elementary school that children regard discrepancies between a speaker’s verbal and nonverbal communication as indicating dishonesty (Rotenberg et al., 1989). What is more, children younger than six are likely to endorse self-report as a means to learn about such highly-esteemed qualities as the intelligence of the self-reporting person (Heyman and Legare, 2005), thereby rendering themselves potentially gullible in matters in which others have a strong motive to lie.
Finally, even older children (six to ten) are susceptible to suggestibility by sources they regard as powerful (Wheeless et al., 1983) or whom they perceive as in a position to reward or punish them (Loftus and Ketchum, 1991; Ceci and Bruck, 1993). This brief review of the empirical literature suggests that the move to more ‘sceptical trust’ develops gradually, and in any case is significantly less well developed in three-year-olds than it is in four-year-olds (Koenig et al., 2004).

12. This qualification is very important. It would appear that preschoolers are highly insensitive to an interlocutor’s access to the truth of what she is reporting. This of course is one of the lessons of the widely-cited ‘false belief test’ (Wimmer and Perner, 1983). Their result was extended by Taylor and colleagues (Taylor et al., 1994), who showed that this insensitivity in young children extends to include not only features of locally observed objects, but also more general information about the world. More recently, Wellman et al. (2001) have drawn the general lesson implicit in the foregoing studies: that, until the age of four, children do not appear to appreciate that beliefs (whether their own or others’) can be false.

13. More on this below.
14. Sally wouldn’t put it like this, of course. But I let this pass for the time being.
15. Here I am assuming a relatively weak modal condition on knowledge: S knows that p through method M (alternatively: on the basis of reasons R), only if M (alternatively: having R) would not easily have lead S to form a false belief. (This is a widely shared assumption among epistemologists across the spectrum of views in epistemology.) Assuming that Sally’s method is that of trusting Father (when he is sincere and doesn’t say something obviously false), Sally fails to satisfy this condition.
16. For example, whether one requires good reasons to regard the testimony as reliable, or one holds instead that a lack of reasons to doubt the reliability are sufficient. This is close to the issue at the heart of the so-called reductionism/anti-reductionism debate in the epistemology of testimony. I will return to this briefly below. For my reasons for thinking that this debate cross-cuts the issue presently before us, see Goldberg, 2006a.
17. At least not in any environment with the usual amount of sincere but false testimonies.
18. This level of epistemic instability is worse than anything associated with contemporary versions of epistemic contextualism. Those versions allow for instability across conversational contexts in which the attribution of knowledge is being made, whereas on the present proposal the subject’s knowledge is gained or lost even when no attribution is under consideration.
19. Even those authors who are otherwise highly sympathetic to extant versions of epistemic contextualism would agree on that much. What is sensitive to context on their view is not the epistemic goodness of one’s reasons, but the epistemic standards that these reasons need to satisfy if one is to count as knowing.
20. This would mirror a move made by Elizabeth Fricker in the epistemology of testimony literature. Faced with the objection that very young children do not (typically or ever) have positive non-testimonial reasons for regarding their sources as credible, Fricker (whose theory requires these) responds by restricting the demand for such reasons to the ‘mature’ phase of a subject’s life. See Fricker, 1994, 1995.
21. Versions of this claim can be found (implicitly or explicitly) in Burge, 1993; Faulkner, 2000; Goldberg, 2005, 2010, 2011; and Schmitt, 2006. What is more, although she doesn’t make this an explicit part of her view, Lackey (2007) would appear to support the claim that CEA is false of cognitively mature subjects as well: her condition on justified testimonial belief requires reliability in the testimony.
22. A similar claim has been made in terms of reliabilist epistemology; see Goldberg, 2010.
23. In the paragraphs that follow I am deeply indebted to a discussion with Kyla Ebels-Duggan.
24. Again, let us disregard the complications introduced by the truth and anti-Gettierization conditions on knowledge.
25. This was a point I was concerned to make in Goldberg, 2008, where I spoke at length about the restriction in the messages to which the child has access and the support the child receives in assessing them.

26. See note 21 for references.

27. See Goldberg, 2011 for discussion.


29. Let the information management challenge be the challenge of discriminating, among all of the (spoken or written) ‘messages’ a hearer encounters, all and only those which are reliable, and hence worthy of belief. And let us say that a subject does well with respect to this task insofar as she reliably discriminates the true from the false messages, believing only the former.

30. I thank Ben Kotzee for suggesting that I take this issue up, and also for suggesting the sort of answer I am developing.

31. This point echoes a theme made popular by Craig (1990). One need not agree with Craig’s main hypothesis, to the effect that the very point of the verb ‘to know’ is to flag good informants, to agree with him about the central importance of good informants.

REFERENCES


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