

Does Address Make an Epistemic Difference?

Abstract

It is relatively uncontroversial that we can get justified beliefs and knowledge from someone's say-so. Still, it is a matter of debate which factors play a role here. Various philosophers have argued that it is epistemically significant whether one gets addressed directly or whether one is a mere overhearer (a bystander or an eavesdropper). The former shall possess epistemic privileges that the latter is lacking. In connection to this, I will criticize a recent proposal by Edward Hinchman (2012, 2014), showing that it leads to counterintuitive consequences. However, based on this result, I am going to end by defending a weaker conception of the epistemic significance of address: It is epistemically significant for the recipients of information – addressees and overhearers alike – whether the person conveying said information intends to communicate it to an audience or not.

Keywords: social epistemology; testimony; address; norms

1. Address and Epistemic Privilege

Imagine Sally and Adam are having a conversation during which Sally tells Adam various things. Unbeknownst to them, Lara is eavesdropping on them. Thereby she acquires the same information Adam gets. Does it make an epistemic difference that only Adam, but not Lara, is addressed by Sally? Various philosophers have answered “Yes”. In order to make good on this claim, they have tried to show that the addressee possesses epistemic privileges that a mere overhearer is lacking.¹

¹ Here are some options defended in the literature: (1) Only the addressee has the right to complain towards the speaker should she say something false (cf. Moran 2006, 295). (2) Only the addressee has the right to challenge the speaker and to demand reasons from her (cf. Hinchman 2005, 586). (3) Only the addressee has the right to refer to his original informant when passing on the information to a third party (cf. Hinchman 2005, 586; McMyler 2013, 1064 ff.). (For a similar list see Nickel (2012, 312)). However, in each case, it has been argued that the alleged difference between addressee and overhearer doesn't exist or, if it does, isn't epistemically significant. Against (1), Lackey (2008, cp. 8) has argued that addressees and overhearers alike can have the right

In this paper, I am going to focus on what I take to be the most promising attempt to spell out what the addressee's epistemic privilege consists in – due to Edward Hinchman.² Hinchman claims that the speaker does not only assume responsibility for the truth of her statement towards the addressee. Moreover, she also assumes responsibility for meeting the addressee's epistemic needs, should they be known to her: “There are thus two burdens on the shoulders of any speaker who tells you that p: to tell you that p only when it is true that p, and to give you what would count, in your actual doxastic circumstances, as sufficient warrant for believing that p” (Hinchman 2012, 72). Hinchman calls the former “truth-conductive reliability” and the latter “closure-conductive reliability” (cf. Hinchman 2014, 3). For the purpose of illustration, Hinchman draws on scenarios in which the speaker knows that high risks are connected to the hearer receiving false information. He, for example, develops a case where the speaker knows that the hearer suffers from a severe nut-allergy:

[M]y pretty good evidence may suffice for me to believe that this bowl of snacks is nut-free but not for you to believe it, given your nut-allergy. I looked to see if the snacks contained nuts before I began to eat because I dislike the taste of nuts. “No nuts”, I concluded, so I scooped up a handful. Now you arrive and ask me, “Does the bowl contain nuts?” I am about to tell you that it does not contain nuts, since that's what I believe, but then I remember your allergy. “I can't say”, I reply. Of course, I could say, and with no impropriety – if I thought you merely shared my distaste for nuts. But your allergy imposes a higher standard on my telling. It would be a violation of illocutionary norms to treat you as entitled to believe by the evidence that suffice to entitle me to believe. (Hinchman 2014, 22)

Crucially, the speaker only assumes this special responsibility towards her addressee – not towards any overhearers. On the flipside, this means that only the addressee can rely on the speaker to cater to her personal needs. And this puts the addressee in a better epistemic position than any overhearer: [O]nly an addressee, and not any overhearer, can be reasonable in *simply*

to complain towards the speaker. Fricker (2012) has responded that addressees and overhearers are different in so far as they are entitled to different sorts of complaints. However, she concedes that this difference is moral, rather than epistemic, in kind. Against (2), Lackey (2008, cp. 8) has argued that overhearers can also have the right to challenge the speaker and to demand reasons from her. And against (2), Goldberg (2011) and Nickel (2013) have both argued that overhearers can also have the right to defer to their original informant when passing on the information they received to a third party.

² Hinchman develops his account – in part – as a response to the criticisms alluded to in fn. 1.

relying – that is, relying simply and solely – on the speaker’s closure-conductive reliability. (Hinchman 2014, 39). Put differently, only the addressee can get a prima facie justified belief by simply taking the speaker at her word. Overhearers, in contrast, need additional reasons to do so.

2. Address, Stakes and Reasons

Let’s assume, for the sake of argument, that high-stakes are epistemically significant.³ And let’s further assume, also for the sake of argument, that the speaker has the obligation to cater to the addressee’s epistemic needs, should they be known to her. Still, this doesn’t tell us which of the following two questions we should answer affirmatively:

(1) Does the addressee get prima facie justified belief simply in virtue of taking the speaker at her word?

(2) Or does the addressee need further reasons to believe that the speaker in fact knows about the addressee’s needs in order to be justified to believe what the speaker says?

Hinchman is committed to an affirmative answer to (1). After all, if we answer (2) affirmatively, the addressee isn’t in a better epistemic position than other hearers. Rather, anybody who knows the considerations that figure into the speaker’s statement gets an equally strong reason to believe her.⁴ In this section, I am going to criticise Hinchman’s account by arguing that we should answer (2), rather than (1), affirmatively.

In order to do so, I am now going to present a variation of Hinchman’s allergy-case.

Unlike Hinchman, my focus shall be on the hearer’s perspective:

Peanut Allergy: Sarah has invited Tom and Harry for movie night. While Tom is an old friend, Harry is a new acquaintance. Both suffer from a severe peanut allergy. However, only Tom knows that Sarah is aware of his allergy. He told her about it in the past. In contrast to this, Sarah accidentally witnessed Harry suffering an allergic

³ Like Hinchman, I am going to focus on high-stakes situations, as I believe that they provoke especially strong intuitions.

⁴ Moreover, Hinchman is explicit about his account being incompatible with evaluating whether one possesses positive reasons for believing the speaker: “[I]t is important not to require that the addressee positively assess the speaker for trustworthiness; that is incompatible with his believing the speaker in the respect the assurance view [Hinchman’s account] emphasizes” Hinchman (2014, 41).

reaction, without him being aware of her presence. In order not to endanger her guests, Sarah makes extra sure that the bowl of snacks doesn't contain any peanuts. When Tom and Harry arrive, Tom asks Sarah whether the bowl contains peanuts. She answers "No".

As Tom and Harry are both Sarah's guests, and as Sarah knows about both allergies, we can assume that her statement is addressed at both. It would be a violation of her duties as a host if she were to address only one of them.⁵

Yet, intuitively, only Tom, but not Harry, is justified to believe Sarah and to start eating. This is because only Tom may assume that Sarah is aware of his condition and has therefore answered with due diligence. In contrast to this, Harry may not assume that Sarah has tailored her statement to his doxastic needs. For all he knows, Sarah is ignorant of his condition. *Peanut Allergy* shows that what counts is not who gets addressed. Rather, what counts is what one knows about the considerations that inform a speaker's statement. Of course, the addressee might have more information about the speaker in this regard than an overhearer has. But she doesn't have this information in virtue of being addressed. It's equally possible that both are on par here. And we can also imagine cases where the overhearer has more relevant information than the addressee.⁶

In response, Hinchman might try to capture the intuition provoked by *Peanut Allergy* within his theoretical framework. Here, it is important to stress that Hinchman takes an addressee's justification to be subject to defeaters.⁷ Traditionally, philosophers in the testimony-debate have focused on defeaters against what Hinchman calls "truth-conducive reliability".⁸ Defeaters that speak against the truth of the speaker's words. If Harry possesses

⁵ Cf.: "[T]he relevant communicative intention involved in addressing a communicative act to an audience is something that can be at least partly determined by convention". This means for the speaker: "[T]hus whom she is addressing is not strictly speaking up to her" (McMyler 2013, 1078).

⁶ Cf. Lackey (2008, 236).

⁷ Cf.: "[Y]our trust is reasonable to the extent that it is not, as some say, 'blind' but instead governed by a counterfactual sensitivity – including appropriate responsiveness – to evidence of untrustworthiness in the speaker" Hinchman (2014, 41).

⁸ Cf. e. g. Burge (1993, 467), Audi (1998, 142), Weiner (2003, 257).

such a defeater, then this would explain why, intuitively, Harry is not justified to simply believe what he is told.

But we can simply stipulate that this is not the case. That is, we can assume that Harry has no reason to believe that what Sarah says is false. More precisely, he has no reasons to doubt her sincerity or competence. And he doesn't possess independent reasons that speak against the truth of what she says. Hence, Hinchman can't appeal to a defeater against Sarah's truth-conductive reliability to account for *Peanut Allergy*.

Still, Hinchman might argue we also have to consider a hearer's reasons against what he calls "closure-conductive reliability" as defeaters: A hearer's testimony-based belief can be defeated because she possesses reasons that speak against her believing the speaker knows what's at stake for her and thus can't take these considerations into account.⁹ As Harry has no reason to believe that Sarah is aware of his condition, he possesses (or should possess) a defeater against Sarah's closure-conductive reliability with regard to him. And this defeater explains why, intuitively, Harry is not justified to simply believe what he is told.

However, I'm now going to argue that we shouldn't conceive of reasons speaking against a speaker's closure-conductive reliability as defeaters. To see why, we have to consider the role that defeaters play within a framework of justification. Defeaters only come into play against a backdrop of prima facie justification. Only if I'm prima facie justified to believe that my visual perception is reliable, can this justification get defeated when you tell me that you mixed LSD in my drink.¹⁰ And only if I'm prima facie justified to believe that what you tell me

⁹ Hinchman suggests as much when he writes: "It is only when you trust her – when you rely on her not only to be speaking the truth but also to be appropriately responsive to your epistemic needs – that we must construe the reasonability of your reliance in terms of a (counterfactual) sensitivity to evidence that she is not thus reliable" (Hinchman 2014, 41).

¹⁰ Goldman (1979/2012) takes visual perception to be a prime candidate for a reliable, and hence prima facie justification conveying, belief-forming process.

is true, can my justification get defeated when I learn that you are a notorious liar.¹¹ You can't defeat what isn't there in the first place.

And we can't be prima facie justified to believe that a speaker is closure-conductively reliable.¹² That is, we can't be prima facie justified to believe that any given speaker knows about our epistemic position, so that she can then take it into account. This is because how much a speaker knows about us, and thus about our epistemic needs, always depends on our concrete relationship towards that speaker (a family member, a friend, an acquaintance, a stranger). No generalizations are possible here. Rather, whether a speaker knows about our predicament (and can hence take it into account) has to be evaluated by an appeal to reasons (both for and against the speaker possessing this knowledge) in the first place in each instance where it is important to us that the speaker possesses this knowledge. This has the following consequence: If we can't be prima facie justified to believe that a given speaker is closure-conductively reliable, then reasons speaking against the speaker's closure-conductive reliability can't be conceived of as defeaters. Therefore, Hinchman can't appeal to the violation of a no-defeater condition in order to account for *Peanut Allergy*.

A defender of addressee privilege might concede at this point that both an addressee and an overhearer need additional reasons to believe what they are told in high-risk situations. Neither one can simply take the speaker at her word. Yet, she might still claim that addressees and overhearers differ with regard to their reasons. The addressee can reason as follows: "The speaker knows about my nut-allergy. She will be extra cautious in claiming that the bowl contains no nuts. Therefore, I am justified to believe that the bowl contains no nuts". In contrast to this, an overhearer has to reason somewhat differently: "The speaker knows about her interlocutor's nut-allergy. She will be extra cautious in claiming that the bowl contains no nuts

¹¹ There are several accounts available in the literature as to why we should be prima facie justified to believe that what we are told is true – cf. e.g. Reid (1785/2002), Coady (1992), Burge (1993), Goldman (1999), Goldberg (2010), Bräuer (2018).

¹² Hence, in this regard, "closure-conductive reliability" and "truth-conductive reliability" are different (cf. fn. 11).

towards her. Therefore, I am also justified to believe that the bowl contains no nuts”. In short, the overhearer’s justification is parasitic on the addressee’s justification.

However, the alleged difference doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. Upon closer inspection, the reasons alluded to above are not different in any interesting way. Rather, the addressee and the overhearer both employ instances of the same, more general, reasoning-pattern: “The speaker knows about the hearer’s nut allergy. She will be extra cautious in claiming that the bowl contains no nuts. Therefore, I am justified in believing that the bowl contains no nuts”. Of course, the overhearer can only employ this reasoning-pattern because someone else got addressed in the first place. But this doesn’t mean that the addressee and the overhearer significantly differ regarding their justificatory reasons.

3. A Modest Proposal

So far, I have argued against the claim that the addressee possesses an epistemic privilege compared to a mere overhearer. Hence, I take address to be epistemically insignificant in this strong sense. However, I’m now going to defend a weaker conception of the epistemic significance of address:¹³

While it doesn’t make an epistemic difference whether one gets addressed directly, it is epistemically significant whether anybody gets addressed at all.

Someone who asserts something towards someone else is, in virtue of doing so, subject to different kinds of evaluations. Her speech behavior can be assessed with regard to the question in how far it conforms to or violates different norms – e. g. norms concerning informativeness or politeness. For reasons that will become apparent in a moment, two norms that are particularly important with regard to the topic of this paper are the alethic norm and the epistemic norm:¹⁴

¹³ In talking of “strong epistemic significance” and “weak epistemic significance”, I loosely follow McMyler (2013).

¹⁴ Here, I am not making a claim about whether some norms – like AN and EN – bear a special relationship towards the speech act of assertion (cf. e.g. Williamson 1996, 2000), or whether different norm just point to

(AN) Only assert what you believe to be true.

(EN) Only make an assertion when you are in the epistemic position to do so.¹⁵

That AN and EN exist and are widely known to exist is shown by empirical studies. Infants as young as 16 months already try to correct adult speakers if they observe the latter to falsely label objects, both have visual access to (Koenig and Echols 2003). This can be interpreted as showing that infants already have some understanding of assertoric speech aiming at truth.¹⁶ Moreover, 3-year-olds explicitly grasp the difference between assertoric speech and imperative speech. Confronted with assertoric speech, they criticise the speaker if she says something wrong. But confronted with imperative speech, they criticise the hearer for not doing as she is told (Rakoczy and Tomasello 2009).¹⁷ And adult subjects judge that one shouldn't assert something when one doesn't have sufficiently strong reasons for believing that what one says is true. This holds even if the subjects also judge that the speaker really believes what she says (Kneer 2018). These results conform to our everyday experiences. We are prone to criticise speakers if we find out that they lied to us or that they aren't in a position to properly back up their claims.¹⁸ And we expect speakers to know this. These reactions are best explained as responses to perceived violations AN and EN.

It is plausible to assume that AN and EN play some role in explaining how we can acquire justified beliefs and knowledge from someone's say-so. These norms, and our

different dimensions along which assertions can be evaluated, without there being important differences regarding these dimensions of evaluation (cf. e.g. Maitra 2011; Johnson 2018). Rather, my point is that someone who asserts something is, in virtue of doing so, subject to evaluation relative to different norms.

¹⁵ It is widely accepted in the literature that asserting properly is tied to the fulfilment of an epistemic norm. Arguably, the most popular candidates for what it means to fulfil this norm are the knowledge norm: Only assert that p when you know p to be true (see e.g. Williamson 2000; DeRose 2002; Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005; Hawthorne and Stanley 2008); and the evidence norm: Only assert that p when you have strong evidence that p is true (see e.g. Searle 1969; Grice 1989; Pritchard 2005; Lackey 2008; Lawlor 2013). I won't take sides on this issue here.

¹⁶ Koenig and Echols talk about infants explicitly trying to interrupt and repair assertoric speech (cf. Koenig and Echols 2003, 198). And Rakoczy and Tomasello observe about the study by Koenig and Echols: "In a rather liberal way, this could be interpreted as a surprise response to a violation of a linguistic norm" (Rakoczy and Tomasello 2009, 206).

¹⁷ Rakoczy and Tomasello (2009) say that "young children understand the normative direction of fit of different speech acts".

¹⁸ Cf. e. g. Goldberg (2011), Graham (2015), Kauppinen (2018).

knowledge of them, might explain why we are prima facie justified to believe what we are told.¹⁹ Or they might be part of an inference to the best explanation as to why what we are told is likely to be true.²⁰ We can use the example from the beginning to illustrate these points. Adam and Lara might be prima facie justified to believe what Sally tells them, because they understand that, in making an assertion, Sally implicitly commits herself to upholding AN and EN. Or they might be justified to believe Sally, because they can reason as follows: “Sally said that p. And Sally is a very honest and diligent person. She wouldn’t claim that p if she didn’t believe that p was true and if, moreover, she didn’t have strong reasons for doing so”.

Now contrast this example with cases like the following:²¹

Private Diary: A private diary is found after the author’s death. The author would have never written a diary if she had known that it would someday be found and read.

Secret Soliloquy: Taking himself to be alone, a murderer talks to himself about his crime. Unbeknownst to him, someone accidentally listens in on him. He would have remained silent, had he known about the witness.

In both cases, no one gets addressed. There is no intention whatsoever to communicate with an audience. Hence, neither the author nor the murderer undertakes any implicit commitment regarding AN and EN. Someone who doesn’t address an audience may mix fact and fiction, firm beliefs and mere hunches anyway she pleases. Holding this against her would be beside the point – AN and EN don’t apply here. Consequently, AN and EN can’t figure in the explanation of how a posthumous reader or an accidental witness can acquire justified beliefs or knowledge in these instances. Different reasons would be needed in order to explain how one can get justified beliefs and knowledge in *Private Diary* and *Secret Soliloquy*. And because address is significant with regard to the reasons we can appeal to in order to explain how we can acquire justified beliefs and knowledge from someone’s say-so, address does indeed make an epistemic difference.

¹⁹ Cf. e. g. Ross (1986), Bräuer (2018).

²⁰ Cf. e. g. Nickel (2013), Fricker (2015).

²¹ Cf. Owens (2006) and Lackey (2008).

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