In the latter part of the 20th century religious epistemology underwent somewhat of a revolution, centered on an investigation into the epistemology of religious experience. This work perhaps cumulated in 1991 with William Alston’s *Perceiving God.* What made this a revolution was not the topic of religious experience—philosophers of religion had treated that topic extensively before. Rather, it was the methodology that Alston and others employed. In sum, these philosophers took advantage of recent developments in the epistemology of perception and perceptual experience *in general,* and applied them to the epistemology of religious experience *in particular.* The idea was this: recent work in the epistemology of perception made traditional skepticism about religious experience out of date, precisely because that skepticism traded on an inadequate and out-dated understanding of the nature of perceptual evidence in general. The current paper takes that idea as its model. In short, I believe that recent developments in the epistemology of

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1 This paper brings together material from "Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony," in *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology,* Dariusz Lukasiewics and Roger Pouivet, eds., (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2012); and "No-Fault Atheism," in *Divine Hiddenness,* Adam Green and Eleonore Stump, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

testimony make it time for a second wave of advances in religious epistemology. This paper constitutes an attempt along those lines.

The paper proceeds as follows. Part One reviews three sceptical arguments regarding religious belief and testimonial evidence. The first two are versions of “the problem of religious diversity”: How can religious belief be reasonable in the context of conflicting testimony regarding religious truths? The third is Hume’s famous argument regarding testimonial evidence for miracles. The common theme here is that testimonial evidence seems inadequate to support reasonable belief in matters religious, especially in the context of conflicting evidence. Part Two steps back from our three sceptical arguments in order to consider some recent work in the epistemology of testimony. Several issues regarding the nature of testimonial evidence in general are considered, and an account of testimonial evidence is defended. Part Three returns to issues regarding testimonial evidence and religious belief, and uses the results of Part Two to reconsider the sceptical arguments in Part One.

**Part One. Some Problems in Religious Epistemology: Three Skeptical Arguments.**

“The Problem of Religious Diversity” has been much discussed in religious epistemology.\(^3\) Stated very generally, the problem is this: The plurality of religious traditions, and the attending fact of conflicting religious beliefs among traditions, seems

to undermine the epistemic standing of religious belief in general, including one’s own. Here are two ways that the general problem can arise.

First, I might reflect that it is merely a historical accident that I was born into one religious tradition rather than another, and therefore merely an accident that I received the testimony about religious matters that I did. Moreover, the religious beliefs I have now are largely influenced by my receiving the testimony that I did. If I had been born into a different tradition, and received different testimony, then I would not have the same religious beliefs that I do now. In fact, it is plausible that I would have religious beliefs that conflict with those I have now. But then it seems too much an accident that I have the religious beliefs that I do. Even if I am lucky, even if I am born into the one true faith and I am handed down nothing but religious truths, it seems still just an accident that I am in that tradition and believe those truths. Let’s call this “The Problem of Accidental Belief.” The problem can be stated more formally as follows:

**The Argument from Luck**

1. When one forms a true religious belief on the basis of testimony from within a tradition, it is just an accident (just a matter of luck) if one forms a true belief on the basis of this testimony rather than a false belief on the basis of different testimony. In particular, if one had been born into a different testimonial

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4For ease of exposition, I here treat atheism as a “religious tradition” and the belief that God does not exist as a “religious belief.”
tradition, then one would have formed different religious beliefs on the basis of
different testimony, but it is just a matter of luck that one was born into his or her
religious tradition rather than another.

2. Knowledge cannot tolerate that sort of luck or accident.

Therefore,

3. True religious belief based on testimony from within a tradition cannot count as
knowledge.

Here is a second way that the problem can arise. I might reflect on the fact that I am
nothing special when it comes to matters religious. I am not more intellectually gifted or
more intellectually rigorous than the next guy. In the language of contemporary
epistemology, many of the people who hold religious beliefs that conflict with mine are
my “epistemic peers.” For example, many of those people base their religious beliefs on
roughly the same sort of evidence on which I base mine—i.e. on testimonial evidence
from within their own traditions. Moreover, many of those people have the same
evidence regarding religious diversity that I do—they are just as aware as I am about the
diversity of religious traditions, and the diversity of testimony therein. But then who am
I to stick to my guns in the face of disagreement? For that matter, who are they to stick to
their guns? Shouldn’t we all be more skeptical in the face of our common epistemic
position?
Consider a non-religious case: I confidently believe, and think I know, that our dinner bill comes to less than one hundred dollars. (Let’s say I have just looked at the bill and added the total.) But then I find out that you, who are as well placed epistemically as I am, disagree. You confidently tell me that the bill has come to well over one hundred dollars. Can I reasonably stick to my guns here? Can you? Shouldn’t we now both lose our confidence, at least until the conflict can be explained and resolved? Let’s call this “The Problem of Peer Disagreement.”5 Here is that problem stated more formally:

**The Argument from Peer Disagreement**

1. If my epistemic peers disagree with me on some issue, then it is unreasonable for me to continue believing as I do. I ought to lose my confidence, or even suspend my belief, at least until the disagreement can be explained and resolved.

2. But many people who are my epistemic peers disagree with me on matters religious. In particular, my peers in different testimonial traditions do.

Therefore,

3. It is unreasonable for me to continue believing as I do in matters religious.

Finally, consider Hume’s famous argument regarding testimony about miracles.⁶ According to Hume, it is never reasonable to believe, on the basis of testimonial evidence, that a miracle has occurred. There has been much debate about how Hume’s argument is supposed to go, but here (I believe) is a plausible reconstruction.

First, suppose we are presented with testimony that some apparent miracle has occurred—let’s say that someone has risen from the dead. According to Hume, reasonableness requires that we weigh this testimonial evidence against whatever other evidence we have that the event in question did not occur. That is the first premise of the argument. But since the event in question is an apparent miracle, that guarantees that our evidence against its occurring will be very good indeed. Here is the argument for that: If the even in question appears to be a miracle, then it must conflict with an apparent law of nature. But nothing could appear to be a law of nature unless we have very good evidence for it—unless we have excellent evidence for it, in fact. That is the second

⁶ From *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 10, *Of Miracles*.
Finally, Hume’s third premise is that our evidence in favor of the event’s occurring will always be less than excellent. That is because we already know that people often testify falsely about purported miracles occurring. Sometimes people lie. Sometimes they are self-deceived. Sometimes they just make a mistake. In sum, the track record is not very good. And in light of that track record, the testimonial evidence for the present case is not very good either. In any case, it won’t be excellent. But now all Hume’s premises are in place: Our testimonial evidence that an apparent miracle has occurred will never be as good as our evidence that it has not occurred. And so we can never be reasonable in believing, on the basis of testimonial evidence, that a miracle really has occurred. Here is the argument again:

Hume’s Argument (reconstructed)

1. In any case where we are presented with testimony that an apparent miracle M has occurred, we must weigh that testimonial evidence in favor of M’s occurrence against our evidence that M has not occurred.

2. But if M is an apparent miracle, then M must conflict with an apparent law of nature L, for which our evidence must be excellent. (Our evidence for L (and hence against M’s occurrence) must amount to excellent inductive evidence, or else L would not be an apparent law of nature.)
3. On the other hand, our testimonial evidence in favor of M’s occurrence will always be less than excellent. (This because testimony in favor of miracles carries a less than excellent track record: we know of many cases where testimony that some miracle has occurred was false.)

Therefore,

4. In all cases where we are presented with testimony that some apparent miracle has occurred, our testimonial evidence in favor of M’s occurrence will always be weaker than our inductive evidence against M’s occurrence. (from 1-3)

Therefore,

5. It is always unreasonable to believe, merely on the basis of testimonial evidence, that a miracle has occurred. (from 4)

**A common problem?**

We have reviewed three arguments that threaten skepticism about religious beliefs based on testimony. The first is put in terms of knowledge, the second and third in terms of reasonable belief. Do our skeptical arguments have anything in common? Do they sound some common theme? Perhaps it is this: that testimonial evidence cannot give
religious belief adequate support or grounding, especially in the context of conflicting evidence. Put differently, testimonial evidence is not “up to the task” epistemically speaking—it is inadequate to give us either knowledge or reasonable belief, at least in matters religious, at least in the sort of circumstances in which we actually find ourselves.7

One reaction that religious believers can have to this theme is to embrace it. That is, many believers are happy to embrace a skeptical conclusion, in favor of some brand of fideism, or anti-intellectualism, or even irrationalism. Two considerations should make us wary about this reaction, however. The first is that the resulting faith entails a kind of intellectual schizophrenia. That is because, in very many contexts, we are happy to express our faith confidently, without qualification, and without apology. For example, we teach our children that we are all God’s children, that God loves us, that God wants certain things for us, and that God wants certain things from us. And although we teach our children to be reflective and critical about such claims, and about what such claims mean, we also teach them not to be overly skeptical, overly cautious, or overly timid about their faith. That is, we also teach them not to be unreflective and uncritical about pressures not to believe.

The second reason we should be wary of a skeptical reaction is more specific to present purposes. Namely, that the three skeptical arguments directed at religious belief

7 The sort of reasonableness at issue here is itself “epistemic,” or the kind of reasonableness that is (among other things) required for knowledge. For ease of exposition, I will often talk below in terms of knowledge only. However, much of what is said applies to reasonable belief as well.
seem to prove too much. That is, it is at least plausible that they trade on considerations that, if sound, would have skeptical consequences far beyond the realm of religious belief. Consider that belief based on testimony is ubiquitous. So is conflicting evidence. Accordingly, if we require too much for the epistemic adequacy of testimonial evidence, far-reaching skeptical consequences threaten.

All this suggests that we should take a step back. In particular, we should more carefully consider what is required for testimonial knowledge and reasonable belief in general. More specifically, we should consider what testimonial evidence would have to be like in order to avoid skeptical consequences more generally. Having done that, we will be in a better position to adjudicate our questions about religious belief in particular.

Part Two. Some Recent Work in the Epistemology of Testimony.

Recently there has been an explosion of interest in the epistemology of testimony. The contemporary literature does not discuss skepticism about testimonial evidence directly, but it is nevertheless driven by worries about skepticism in an important way. Much like contemporary epistemology in general, the epistemology of testimony is largely framed by an anti-skeptical methodology. That is, the name of the game is to understand how testimonial knowledge and testimonial justification are possible. That is, we begin with a methodological assumption that testimonial knowledge and reasonable belief based on testimonial evidence is possible. However, this assumption is not uncontested. Some recent work in the epistemology of testimony has challenged this assumption and offered alternative views of how testimonial knowledge is possible.

testimony are possible and are even widespread. The theoretical task is to explain how that is possible, to explain what testimonial evidence must be like in order for testimonial knowledge and reasonable belief to be as widespread as we think they are.

A major motivation for anti-skepticism about testimony is anti-skepticism in general. In general, contemporary epistemologists assume that knowledge of various kinds is widespread, and they take themselves to be explaining how such knowledge is possible. But now the following substantive claim becomes important in this methodological context: We would have very little knowledge at all, if testimonial knowledge is not widespread. That is, our knowledge in general is heavily dependent on our testimonial knowledge in particular. Thus epistemologists who want to save widespread knowledge, who want to be anti-skeptical in general, are motivate to save testimonial knowledge in particular.

I have put the forgoing in terms of testimonial knowledge, but we could say the same things about reasonable belief—that is, our reasonable beliefs (even if they fall short of knowledge) in general depend heavily on other of our reasonable beliefs based on testimony, and so skepticism regarding the latter threatens a broader skepticism regarding the former. This kind of anti-skeptical motivation drives nearly every aspect of the contemporary literature on the epistemology of testimony.

Three Related Issues
Perhaps the major issue discussed in the epistemology of testimony is whether testimonial evidence can be “reduced” to some other familiar kind. The issue here is whether testimonial evidence, and hence testimonial knowledge, is epistemically special, or whether, rather, it can be understood as arising from familiar epistemic sources such as perception and induction. Put another way: Does testimonial evidence (or knowledge, or reasonable belief) require special treatment in epistemology, insofar as it is an epistemically distinctive phenomenon?

Two other issues that get a lot of attention are closely related to this one. First, can testimonial evidence generate new knowledge, or are all cases of testimonial knowledge cases of knowledge transmission from testifier to hearer? Second, is testimonial evidence, and hence testimonial knowledge, distinctively social? Clearly, testimonial knowledge is social in a superficial sense—it requires both a testifier and a hearer—but is it social in an epistemically interesting sense? Again, does it thereby require special treatment in epistemology?

These three issues are hotly debated, largely because different cases pull our intuitions in different directions. Consider the following, for example:

**Case 1.** A seasoned investigator questions a potentially uncooperative witness.

The investigator asks questions and the witness answers them, but clearly the investigator should not just believe whatever the witness says. On the contrary, she will employ skills learned and honed over a career to discern what is and is not believable in what the witness asserts. Moreover, it is plausible to think of these skills in terms of bringing to
bear inductive evidence—the investigator employs various well-grounded generalizations to determine whether the witness is telling the truth in a particular instance.

But now consider some other cases:

**Case 2.** A job applicant tells you that he has no criminal record.

**Case 3.** You ask directions from a stranger in an unfamiliar city. He tells you that the train station is down the street.

**Case 4.** You ask your friend whether he intends to come to your party, and he tells you that he does.

**Case 5.** A third-grade teacher tells his students that England is west of France.

**Case 6.** A mother tells her child that there is milk in the refrigerator.

In Cases 1 and 2 (the investigator, the job applicant) it seems clear that knowledge requires something akin to good inductive reasons. By the time we get to Cases 5 and 6 (student/teacher and parent/child), it is less plausible that basing one’s belief on inductive reasons is required for knowledge, and more plausible that the speaker can believe straight away what she is told. It is also more plausible that something epistemically special is going on—that testimonial knowledge depends on a relationship between
speaker and hearer that is present in these cases but not in the first. Cases 3 and 4 (asking directions, trusting a friend) seem somewhere in between.

Of course, it is not obvious how to handle any of these cases. That is, it is not clear what to say regarding any one of them. But more problematically, it is not clear that anything can be said about all of them together. That is because the different cases seem to place very different demands on the hearers. In particular, some cases suggest a necessary condition on testimonial knowledge—that the hearer needs something akin to good inductive reasons for knowledge—that she must base her testimonial belief on such reasons. But other cases suggest sufficient conditions for testimonial knowledge that do not include that necessary condition. Students can learn from their teachers, and children from their caretakers, it would seem, without extensive inductive evidence. And if we say that they can’t, then a much broader skepticism threatens, given the heavy dependence of all of us on our teachers and caretakers. And so a single account of testimonial evidence, one that explains how testimonial evidence gives rise to knowledge in all of the cases, seems unavailable.

We can put the problem in the form of a dilemma:

1. Either testimonial knowledge requires inductive evidence on the part of the hearer or it does not.
2. If it does not, then testimonial knowledge is too easy. There will be cases counted as knowledge that should not be.
3. If it does, then testimonial knowledge is too hard. There will be cases not counted as knowledge that should be.
Therefore,

4. An adequate account of testimonial knowledge is impossible: a given account must make testimonial knowledge either too easy for some cases or too hard for others.

Once again, I have put the forgoing considerations in terms of testimonial knowledge. But also once again, we could say similar things, and generate a similar dilemma, regarding reasonable belief based on testimony.

We can say similar things about whether testimonial knowledge involves transmission, and whether there is a distinctive social dimension to testimonial knowledge. That is, our cases pull in different directions on these issues as well. Thus in Cases 1 and 2 it seems that nothing like transmission is going on, or that there is anything distinctively social involved in the hearers coming to know. On the contrary, it seems that the hearers must use something like inductive evidence to judge whether the relevant testimony is reliable. But by the time we get to Cases 5 and 6, the notion of “transmission” makes more sense—there does seem to be a sense in which the teacher transmits her knowledge to her students, and the parent transmits his knowledge to his child, and without anything like inductive reasoning on the hearer’s part required. Likewise, there seems to be something distinctively social about the process of coming to know in these cases—transmission of the relevant sort plausible depends on the social relationship between speaker and hearer, and on the social roles they play in giving and receiving the testimony in question.
Again, the problem that our series of cases present is this: Some of those cases suggest a necessary condition on testimonial knowledge--that testimonial knowledge (or reasonable belief) requires something like basing one’s belief on good inductive reasons. But others of those cases suggest that testimonial knowledge is nothing like that. They suggest, rather, that testimonial knowledge is its own kind of animal, a distinctively social phenomenon that involves something like knowledge transmission. No single approach handles all the cases well.

The thought might now occur that all of our cases should not be handled the same way—that testimonial knowledge does not make up a single epistemic kind. Testimonial evidence, we might say, is not homogeneous. That will not be satisfying, however, without an explanation regarding why that should be so. We need a theory that tells us why not all testimonial evidence (or knowledge, or reasonable belief) can be handled the same way.

A Proposal for Progress: The “Information Economy” Model.\(^9\)

A number of philosophers have argued that a central purpose of our concept of knowledge is to flag quality information and quality sources of information for use in practical reasoning and decision making. The general idea can be summed up like this:

The concept of knowledge serves to govern the production and flow of actionable

information, or information that can be used in action and practical reasoning, within a community of information sharers.\textsuperscript{10}

Now consider some elaborations on that general idea. First, if our general idea is even broadly correct, then we should expect there to be at least two kinds of activity governed by the concept of knowledge. On the one hand, there will be activities concerned with \textit{acquiring} or \textit{gathering} information, or getting information into the community of knowers in the first place. For example, empirical observation serves to produce information about physical objects in our environment, introspection serves to produce information about accessible mental states. On the other hand, there will be activities concerned with \textit{distributing} information throughout the community of knowers; that is, there will be mechanisms for distributing information that is already in the social system. For example, teaching in the classroom, testifying in court, and reporting in the boardroom all serve this distributing function. In sum, there will be activities that input information into the system in the first place, and activities that keep the information flowing.

Let's call the first \textit{acquisition activities} and the second \textit{distribution activities}. The norms governing acquisition activities play a “gate-keeping” function-- they exert quality control so as to admit only high quality information into the social system. The norms

governing distribution activities, on the other hand, answer to a distributing function—they allow high quality information already in the system to be distributed as needed throughout the community of knowers. Insofar as testimony plays this distributing function, it serves to make information already in the system available to those who need it.

Here now is a second elaboration that will be important for our purposes: It is reasonable to suppose that the norms governing the acquisition of information will be different from the norms governing the distribution of information. Suppose we were writing the norms, or setting the standards, for these two kinds of activity. We should make it harder to get information into the system than we make it to distribute that information, once in. This is because, again, the dominant concern governing the acquisition function is quality control—we want a strong gatekeeping mechanism here. But the dominant concern governing the distribution function will be easy access—we want information that has already passed the quality control test to be easily and efficiently available to those who need it. Different norms or standards are appropriate to these distinct functions.

Scientific knowledge provides a good illustration of this general picture. Any item of scientific knowledge must have its original source in scientific methods of investigation, including those of gathering evidence, testing theories, etc. But eventually that knowledge spreads through a shared system by means of various kinds of testimony. Through record keeping, formal and informal teaching, journal articles, public lectures, media reports, and the like, what begins as knowledge for few becomes knowledge for many. Moreover, the norms and standards governing the first kind of activity are
different from the norms and standards governing the second. Quality control is exercised over both kinds of activity, of course, but in different ways. Hence the norms governing the exchange of information through journals, seminars, etc., are distinct from those governing experiment design, statistical analysis, theory choice, etc.

In the case of scientific knowledge, then, various institutional and social practices are in place so as to bring high quality information into the system, and also to distribute it throughout the system. Different norms govern these different practices, each according to its distinctive purpose or function. What holds for scientific knowledge in this regard plausibly holds for knowledge in general.

Here now is a third suggestion for elaborating the model: It is plausible that testimonial knowledge itself comes in two kinds. That is, it is plausible that testimonial knowledge sometimes serves the distribution function of the concept of knowledge, and sometimes the acquisition function. The distribution function gives us what might be considered paradigmatic cases of testimonial knowledge; for example, the attorney/client, student/teacher and parent/child cases above. But testimony sometimes serves an acquisition function, bringing information into a community of knowledge for the first time. Plausibly, this is what is going on in the investigator case and the job applicant case above. Hence the present model explains why a student or a child can believe straight away what a teacher or a parent tells her, and also explains why an investigator or interviewer cannot.
Figure 1.

Information Acquisition

[Diagram showing the process of information acquisition with S and H]

Information Distribution

[Diagram showing the process of information distribution with S and H]
To be clear, the idea is not that, in the distribution role, testimonial knowledge involves no burdens on the hearer at all. In most or all of our cases, it would be implausible that the hearer can “just believe” what she is told, with no engagement of her own critical faculties whatsoever. Rather, the idea is that the burdens on the hearer are different in the distribution role than in the acquisition role, insofar as the norms governing the two activities are at the service of different purposes. This is enough to explain the differential burdens on hearers in cases of testimonial knowledge, as well as the difference in burdens associated with (some cases of) testimonial knowledge and non-testimonial knowledge.

### Three modes of testimonial exchange: Interpersonal, social, and institutional.
On the present view, testimonial exchanges are governed by two sets of norms: those pertaining to the acquisition of quality information and those pertaining to its distribution. Moreover, the norms governing testimonial exchanges in the distribution role are themselves various, depending on additional factors regarding the social location of speaker and hearer. Here we may distinguish at least three kinds of relation that structure our social environment, and that enable successful testimonial exchanges in the distribution role. For lack of better labels, we may call them "interpersonal," "informal social," and "formal institutional."

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11 Although it is consistent with the model that there might be limit cases, where there are no epistemic burdens on the hearer at all. Perhaps this is true in the case of very small children being taught by their caregivers.
Interpersonal relations depend primarily on interpersonal experience and "mind reading" that is more or less independent of particular social or institutional roles. Rather, there is a person-to-person connection that underwrites personal trust to one degree or another. This kind of interaction can take place between parents and children, siblings or friends, but also between strangers meeting for the first time. For example, one might trust one stranger to tell the truth but not another, based on quite limited interactions with the two persons. This is because, at times, even limited interaction can be sufficient to mind-read for sincerity and competence, especially in restricted circumstances and for a particular domain.

In contrast to "bare" interpersonal relations, informal social relations depend more on well-defined social roles, for example parent-child, sibling-sibling, neighbor-neighbor, and various kinds of friendship. Interactions in these roles will be governed by interpersonal skills, as above, but also by the social norms governing these specific relationships. For example, it is necessary to mind-read in order to cooperate with one's neighbors in some neighborhood task, but how one cooperates (what expectations one has, what one is willing to sacrifice, etc.) will also be influenced by the social norms structuring the neighbor-neighbor relationship.

Here is one example of how the norms structuring social relations might enable the reliable distribution of quality information. We may suppose that in many cultures it is considered a matter of love and respect to go to one's parents for advice regarding childcare. Norms structuring the relationship thereby create a channel of communication

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12 For more on the epistemic significance of social norms, see Peter Graham, "Epistemic Normativity and Social Norms," in Henderson and Greco.
from experienced parent to new parent. The information carried by that channel will likely be of high quality, given that the parent of a parent has had some success in the childcare domain. The channel itself will likely be of high quality as well, given the norms governing the communication of this kind of information between parent and child. Thus the experienced parent will be highly disposed to provide sincere and competent advice, the new parent will be highly disposed to take that advice seriously, and both parties will be motivated to take care against misinformation and/or misunderstanding.

And now an interesting point is this: the interpersonal skills and social norms underwriting this successful exchange need not have an epistemic motivation or goal. That is, neither the speaker nor the hearer need be motivated (at least not directly) by considerations about truth, knowledge, etc. On the contrary, the entire exchange might be explained in terms of the demands of the relationship, such as love and respect, or even guilt. Likewise, good neighbors might ask and give reliable information about bus routes, or other neighborhood practicalities, primarily motivated by the values of civility, helpfulness, and mutual cooperation that structure the neighbor-neighbor relationship.

Both interpersonal relations and social relations, then, have the effect of structuring exchanges of information between speaker and hearer. Moreover, both kinds of relation can contribute to the epistemic quality of such exchanges. In most testimonial exchanges, perhaps, both kinds of relations work together. For example, there are two reasons that one might trust a friend, one based on interpersonal interaction, and one based on the social relation. Thus one might trust that a friend is telling the truth because "I know her." Alternatively, one might trust a friend because "That is how friends treat
each other." And of course, one might trust for both reasons. Similarly for parent-child trust, neighbor-neighbor trust, etc.

Finally, some relations are defined by more formal institutional roles. For example, teacher-student, doctor-patient, lawyer-client, and employer-employee relationships are largely governed by relevant institutional rules. Here again, the rules in question function in addition to or "on top of" the interpersonal skills and informal social norms discussed above. And here again, institutional rules can contribute to the quality of testimonial exchanges, thereby creating additional reasons to trust. For example, the doctor-patient relationship is underwritten by institutional rules that are designed to guarantee competency and honesty in practitioners. Likewise for the lawyer-client and the employer-employee relationships. Such rules might take the form of government regulations, legal contracts, professional standards, or professional ethics. Together they provide additional structure to the social environment, often in ways that contribute to the epistemic quality of testimonial exchanges. Finally, as in the case of interpersonal skills and informal social norms, institutional rules need not have epistemic goals as their direct or primary motivation. For example, a particular lawyer might have little regard for the truth as such, a particular doctor might place little value on knowledge for its own sake. But in each case there are institutional mechanisms in place to insure honesty and competence in the relevant domains, thereby creating quality channels of information that can be exploited by patients and clients.

Here we may note an analogy to the flow of information in perceptual uptake. In cases of perception, a stable physical environment allows perception to exploit information-carrying signals. For example, a particular profile reliably signals dog,
whereas a different profile reliably signals cat. This is not necessarily the case—the environment must be well suited to visual perception; that is, it must be enabling of the perceptual skills in play. A stable social environment plays the same role regarding the flow of information in testimonial exchanges. Just as natural laws construct a (more or less) stable physical environment, giving it the contours that it has, social norms construct a (more or less) stable social environment, giving it the contours that it has. Natural laws thereby underwrite regularities that can be exploited by perception. Social norms thereby underwrite regularities that can be exploited by testimony.

The case of small children is interesting here. Plausibly, small children have only limited skills for determining the sincerity and competence of speakers. That is, small children, left to themselves, can be somewhat gullible. So how do children manage to learn from testimony as well as they do? The answer is that children are rarely left to themselves. On the contrary, we construct and monitor their social environments so as to keep them safe from insincere and incompetent speakers. Put differently, we engineer environments that enable the transmission of knowledge that their informal education requires. Later in life, we engineer environments that enable their more formal education.

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13 The picture presented by empirical studies is mixed. For an overview of some relevant literature, see Paul L. Harris and Melissa A. Koenig, "The Basis of Epistemic Trust: Reliable Testimony or Reliable Sources?," *Episteme* 4, no. 3 (2007).

The foregoing remarks do not constitute anything approaching a “theory of knowledge”. That is, they do not constitute a theory about the nature of knowledge, nor do they suggest anything approaching necessary and sufficient conditions. Nevertheless, they are substantial enough to allow progress regarding our three issues in the epistemology of testimony. We take a brief look at each of these in turn, and then return to our three skeptical arguments aimed at religious belief.

**a. Reductionism vs. Anti-reductionism**

Can testimonial knowledge be reduced to some other kind of knowledge? Is testimonial knowledge *sui generis*, requiring its own distinctive treatment, or is testimonial knowledge merely an instance of, for example, inductive knowledge, requiring no special epistemology over and above that required for inductive knowledge in general?

On the present approach, it is plausible to think that there are two kinds of testimonial knowledge: a) one in which testimony functions as an original source, along side perception, reason, and other familiar originating sources; and b) one in which testimony functions as a distributing mechanism. In the first case, testimonial knowledge plausibly reduces to other kinds of knowledge. In the second case, testimonial knowledge is plausibly distinctive, and requires a distinctive treatment. This is plausible because the conditions for admitting information into the system are plausibly more demanding than the conditions for distributing that information once admitted. Once admitted, and given the stamp of approval as “usable” or “actionable,” it is reasonable that information should be allowed to flow relatively freely for use by others.

We may now reconsider the dilemma stated above. Here again is its first premise:
1. Either testimonial knowledge requires inductive evidence on the part of the hearer or it does not.

We read that premise with a universal quantifier: it says that either all testimonial knowledge requires inductive evidence on the part of the hearer or it does not. Understood that way, we now are in a position to take the second horn: Not all testimonial knowledge requires inductive evidence. That brings us to premise 2:

2. If it does not, then testimonial knowledge is too easy. There will be cases counted as knowledge that should not be.

On the present proposal, we have good reason for denying this premise. Namely, testimony may at least sometimes function so as to distribute knowledge throughout the system, and do so without requiring inductive evidence on the part of the hearer. In this distributing role, the conditions for testimonial knowledge need not be so demanding.

This answer allows us to embrace the truth contained in premise 2, and which made that premise *prima facie* plausible: that testimonial knowledge *sometimes* requires inductive evidence on the part of the hearer. It does when testimony functions as an original source of knowledge, functioning so as to admit information into the system in the first place, as it plausibly does in Cases 1 and 2.
b. Generation vs. Transmission

Does testimony generate knowledge, or does it transmit knowledge from one knower to another? Our answer here is by now straightforward. In some cases (as in 1 and 2), testimony generates knowledge. That is, it generates knowledge for the hearer, since he or she cannot rely on the speaker to faithfully distribute the information in question. But testimony’s distinctive epistemic function is to transmit knowledge from one knower to others. This is plausibly the function of testimony in Cases 5 and 6, where the hearer can happily accept the information being distributed by the speaker to her audience.

This answer raises an important question, however: When is it appropriate for a hearer to “happily accept” information from a speaker? In other words, when does testimonial evidence properly function in its distributing role in the transmission of knowledge, and when does it properly function as an original source of knowledge? This brings us to our last issue, regarding the social dimension of testimonial knowledge.

c. Is Testimonial Knowledge Distinctively Social?

In what way is testimonial knowledge a social phenomenon? Is it merely that at least two people are involve, or does the social character of testimonial knowledge go deeper than that? The following answer is plausible: At least in its distinctive function of distributing information within a social system, the social character of testimonial knowledge goes deeper than that. Specifically, testimonial evidence distributes information through the system only by means of relevant social mechanisms. Just as we exploit regularities in nature so as to effect the reliable uptake of information, we sometimes exploit social regularities so as to effect the reliable distribution of information.
To see the plausibility of this, return to our six cases. In **Cases 1 and 2**, there is no social mechanism in place to underwrite a reliable transfer of reliable information. Put differently, there is no social relationship between speaker and hearer that would underwrite such a transfer. As our cases progress, however, it becomes increasingly plausible that there is such a relationship. In **Case 3** a stranger is asked for directions, but even here there might be social institutions in place that make the exchange of information more or less reliable. In **Case 4** (asking a friend) this seems even more plausible, and in **Cases 5** (parent to child) and **6** (teacher to student) it seems obvious. That is, in these latter cases it seems obvious that there are social institutions and relationships in place that underwrite reliable transfers of information. In the case of teachers teaching students, this is quite explicit and formal.

Notice that, on the present proposal, hearers are sometimes relieved of epistemic burden by virtue of their occupying a relevant social role. This allows that, for example, children can learn (come to know) simply by listening to their parents. Likewise, students can learn (come to know) simply by listening to their teachers. This oversimplifies somewhat, to be sure. But two important ideas are now in place. First, at least sometimes it is relatively easy to come to know by means of testimonial evidence. And second, at least sometimes this is made so by means of social institutions and relations designed for that purpose. All this is consistent with a third idea, however. Namely, that testimonial evidence sometimes does not afford an easy transmission of knowledge, but rather requires good inductive evidence on the part of the hearer.

**Part Three. Application to Religious Epistemology.**
How should the epistemology of religious belief treat the evidence of testimony? One approach would be to treat testimony as an *originating source* of reasonable belief and knowledge. On that approach, the hearer (or receiver) of testimony would be treated akin to an inductive reasoner. The task of such a reasoner is to gather the relevant evidence, to judge the quality of the evidence on either side, and to form one’s beliefs accordingly. In this instance, the task would be to judge the quality of one’s testimonial evidence, presumably by means of considering such factors as relevant track records, competing explanations of the nature and content of the testimony, etc. In short, the receiver of testimony would be akin to Hume’s hearer of miracles, and epistemic assessment of the receiver/hearer would proceed along roughly Humean lines. Of course, one might think that Hume has got the nature and/or the content of the inductive evidence wrong, and that adjustments to our assessments of the inductive evidence have to be made accordingly. But the rough idea would be in place: testimonial evidence is a species of inductive evidence, and must be assessed accordingly.

An alternative approach, however, would be to treat testimony as having a *distributing* or *transmitting* function. On this approach, the hearer or receiver of testimony might arrive at reasonable belief, or even knowledge, by means of his or her location in a social context. Such location, along with its constituting social roles, might be informal, as when “common knowledge” is passed from individual to individual by means of interpersonal communication. Alternatively, the social location of speaker and hearer might be formal, as when traditional lore is passed from teacher to student by means of formal education. Clearly there will be many cases that fall in between. The
task of religious epistemology, and of the epistemology of testimony more generally, would be to understand the nature and conditions of such knowledge by transmission.

In this final part of the paper I will take this second approach. In particular, I want to consider the consequences of the approach for our three skeptical arguments.

**Application to the three skeptical arguments.**

First, recall The Argument from Luck:

1. When one forms a true religious belief on the basis of testimony from within a tradition, it is just an accident (just a matter of luck) if one forms a true belief on the basis of this testimony rather than a false belief on the basis of different testimony.

2. Knowledge cannot tolerate that sort of luck or accident.

Therefore,

3. True religious belief based on testimony from within a tradition cannot count as knowledge.

On the present approach, we may deny either premise 1 or premise 2. Regarding premise 1, we may deny that when one receives testimony from within a tradition it is “just an accident” or “just a matter of luck” that one forms a true belief on the basis of that
testimony. On the contrary, if the transaction in question constitutes an instance of knowledge transmission, it is underwritten by a reliable transmission of reliable information. That is, the transaction will involve knowledge on the part of the speaker, derived ultimately from some original source of knowledge, and then a reliable transmission of knowledge from speaker to hearer. Moreover, the latter will involve social relations designed for that purpose, and so, again, the hearer’s believing the truth on the basis of the speaker’s testimony will be no accident.

Alternatively, we may deny premise 2 of the argument. That is, we may acknowledge that true belief on the basis of testimony involves some sort of luck; specifically, it involves the luck of being born into a particular tradition, and of occupying a particular social location within that tradition. But we may deny that knowledge cannot tolerate that sort of luck or accident. On the contrary, that sort of social endowment enables testimonial knowledge, much as one’s natural endowments enable knowledge through accurate perception and good reasoning.

Next, consider The Argument from Peer Disagreement. That argument depended on the following premise:

2. Many people who are my epistemic peers disagree with me on matters religious. In particular, my peers in different testimonial traditions do.

On the present approach to testimonial evidence, premise 2 is false. That is because the notion of “epistemic peer” that is operative in that premise is a very strong one—it requires not only that peers are equally intelligent and equally conscientious, but that they
share the same epistemic position regarding the claim that p more generally. For example, epistemic peers must share the same evidence regarding p. But on the present account, people in different testimonial traditions do not share the same epistemic position and do not share the same testimonial evidence, and so are not epistemic peers in the relevant sense.

One might think that simply being aware of another testimonial tradition, and being aware of the testimony within it, puts one in the same epistemic position as those who live within the tradition, at least with respect to the testimony in question. But that confuses a) merely hearing or knowing about testimony, with b) receiving testimonial evidence. The latter, we have seen, requires situation in a reliable testimonial exchange, and that, in turn, requires participation in social practices and institutions that underwrite reliability. Put differently, receiving testimonial evidence requires more than being in the right time and place geographically— it requires being in the right time and place socially.

Finally, we return to the argument from Hume. That argument depended on the following premise:

3. Our testimonial evidence in favor of M’s occurrence will always be less than excellent. (This because testimony in favor of miracles carries a less than excellent track record: we know of many cases where testimony that some miracle has occurred was false.)
We may now see that Hume’s support for premise 3 depends on treating testimony as an originating source of knowledge for the hearer. That is, it treats the hearer as an inductive reasoner, whose task it is to weigh her inductive evidence on each side of the issue and adjust her belief accordingly. But that is misguided in cases where testimony plays a distributing function. Put differently, the conditions for knowledge transmission are plausibly different from the conditions for knowledge by inductive reasoning. That being so, Hume cannot assume that one’s testimonial evidence for a miracle will always be “less than excellent.” For even if that evidence constitutes less than excellent inductive evidence, it might nevertheless constitute excellent testimonial evidence. That would depend on the quality of the testimonial transaction, constituted by the quality of the original source (perhaps the miracle was eye-witnessed) and the quality of the social relations underwriting the testimonial exchange (perhaps the exchange is between trusted friends, verified by reliable authorities, etc.)15

Too Rosy a Picture?

Does the present approach to testimonial evidence, and its application to religious belief in particular, paint too rosy a picture? Does it make rational religious belief and religious knowledge too easy? That depends on the answers to some further questions.

First, it depends on the existence and the extent of originating sources of religious knowledge. Knowledge (or reasonable belief) cannot be transmitted from speaker to hearer if the speaker does not have knowledge (or reasonable belief) to begin with.

15 Hume cites a case involving such a verification process, but does not appreciate its social significance. Cf. Hume, Enquiry, Section 10.
Accordingly, the present approach to testimony and religious belief depends on more traditional issues in the epistemology of religion, i.e. issues regarding originating sources of knowledge and reasonable belief.

But suppose we take it for granted that there are such originating sources, and that they are fairly widespread. That is, suppose we take it for granted that the generation of religious knowledge is fairly common. Questions still remain concerning the conditions for the successful transmission of that knowledge. What, in general, are the conditions for the successful transmission of knowledge within a testimonial tradition? And are those conditions met by religious traditions today?

These questions further divide. For we may ask: What are the conditions for successful inter-personal transmission? At the very least, those would seem to include personal expertise and inter-personal trust. What are the nature and conditions of these in general, and in regard to religious belief in particular? What more is required, over and above appropriate expertise and appropriate inter-personal trust? Similarly, we may ask about the social norms structuring our informal religious communities, and whether they are apt to underwrite the transmission of religious knowledge across members of those communities.

We may also ask: What are the conditions for successful institutional transmission? At the very least, those would seem to include institutional expertise and institutional integrity. In other words, institutional transmission requires institutional authority. What are the nature and conditions of these in general, and in regard to religious belief in particular? What more is required? Here is one thought in that regard: It would seem that epistemic authority depends, in part, on moral authority. That is
because immoral people and institutions cannot be trusted to tell the truth. This
diagnoses a mistake of the Catholic Bishops in the United States: Trying to protect the
teaching (i.e. epistemic) authority of the Church, they covered up sexual abuse by priests.
But this in fact undermined the Church’s epistemic authority, insofar as it undermined her
moral authority. Accordingly, the Bishops will have to account for the epistemic harm
they have done to the Church, as well as the more obvious moral harm.

These questions about the successful transmission of knowledge frame a research
program for social epistemology—for the epistemology of testimony in general, and for
religious epistemology in particular. If the arguments of this essay are correct, then
answers to them are required to determine the full extent of rational religious belief and
religious knowledge. Put differently, questions about knowledge generation will tell only
part of the story about the epistemic standing of religious belief. Questions about
knowledge transmission will be at least as central. 16

16 Thanks for useful discussion to the participants at two conferences: The Right to
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