Trusting others in the sciences: a priori or empirical warrant?

Elizabeth Fricker

Magdalen College, Oxford OX1 4AU, UK

Abstract

Testimony is indispensable in the sciences. To deny the propriety of relying on it engenders an untenable scepticism. But this leaves open the issue of what exactly confers a scientist’s epistemic right to rely upon the word of her colleagues. Some authors have suggested a recipient of testimony enjoys an epistemic entitlement to trust the word of another as such, not requiring evidence of her trustworthiness, so long as there is not evidence of her untrustworthiness. I argue that, whether or not such an on-no-evidence entitlement to believe what one is told exists, it shrinks to irrelevance in the explanation of the basis on which scientists take each other’s word in the scientific community. This is so, since a normally knowledgeable adult hearer is typically awash with relevant evidence, direct and circumstantial, for and against, concerning a teller’s trustworthiness, and this swamps any alleged entitlement to believe in the absence of such evidence. There need not be personal knowledge of the teller, since social role and topic provide evidence regarding trustworthiness. I also discuss the individuation of ‘testimony’ as an epistemic kind. I suggest that we should not attempt to define a category with sharp boundaries, but instead characterise a paradigm case—one person telling another something in face-to-face personal communication—and then notice other cases which both resemble and diverge from this in epistemically relevant features—lectures, media broadcasts, personal letters, personal diaries, etc. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

Keywords: Testimony; Justification; Knowledge; Individualism; Communication

1. The indispensability of trust

Testimony is indispensable in the sciences, that much is clear. In a modern society, any individual’s framework of belief about the nature of the physical and social
world in which she is embedded, both its current state and its history, is derived in large part from reliance on what she has learned from others—through spoken and written word. This diffused structural dependence on testimony in the layperson’s commonsense beliefs holds yet more strongly in the accumulated heritages of specialised knowledge which characterise the sciences. Modern science is an endeavour carried on by geographically dispersed, but communicatively linked, scientific communities. New research is carried on against the background of existing knowledge, and both the conduct of particular experiments and their theoretical interpretation will almost invariably involve the pooling of information and ideas obtained by many researchers. Perhaps we should take seriously the idea that such knowledge is the property not of individuals but of communities. Taking this idea seriously would mean, I suppose, thinking of epistemic norms as applying not to the individuals operating within a scientific community but to the community itself. The approach taken in what follows does not pursue this idea, but is individualistic: individual members of a community are taken to be the primary bearers of justified belief and knowledge, and epistemic norms of belief formation and revision are assumed to apply to these individual members of a community. Statements about what is or is not known by a community are taken to be a loose summary of facts about what is known, or available to be known, by members of that community, on which their truth supervenes.

It is a fact that we—members of modern societies—are possessors of a massive heritage of scientific knowledge going beyond common sense, whose technological fruits we daily enjoy, to the extent that an existence stripped of them is virtually unimaginable. Conjoin with this the fact that reliance on the spoken and written word of others is indispensable for the conduct of research and advance of knowledge in the sciences. A skeptic about testimony, who holds that reliance on the word of others is never justified or knowledge-yielding, cannot square her view with this conjunctive fact. Such blanket skepticism can be quickly dismissed. But to agree that testimony can and often does yield justified or, as I will say, entitled belief, apt to be knowledge, is not to settle the question of how it does so. We are often entitled to rely on the spoken or written word of others; but by what epistemic right do we do so? If we dropped our individualistic framing assumption, this question would simply disappear, or at least radically change its shape. Within the individualistic framework, the question remains: by what right does one person accept that something is so, on the say-so of another, because the other tells her that it is so? Explaining how scientific communities can maintain and preserve existing knowledge, and generate new knowledge, requires answering this question about the basis of an individual’s entitlement to believe what she is told. I will return to this question

---

1 Talk of ‘justified’ belief suggests the believer’s possession of, and ability to supply if challenged, a justification, in the sense of other beliefs or contentful states which serve as a ground for the justified belief. But a believer may believe with epistemic right, though without grounds. I use the term ‘entitled’ to cover all belief which is epistemically righteous, whether or not its being so consists in the believer’s possession of grounds.
shortly. First, let us look more carefully at how ‘testimony’ in the sense we are interested in, is best delimited.

2. The limits of testimony

Our question may be rephrased thus: how can testimony confer entitled belief, apt to be knowledge, on one who trusts it, that is, forms belief in what the testifier asserts to be so, on the basis of her say-so? But this question is well posed only if there is indeed an epistemic kind, for which we may use this label, about which a general account may be given of how it sometimes yields entitled belief. (Discussions of the epistemology of memory and of perception make the same methodological assumption.) Pessimism in advance seems misplaced, and we do well to start out under this governing assumption and see what we can come up with. However, I think the attempt to characterise a sharply delineated epistemic kind with precise boundaries, to give an essence of testimony by means of necessary and sufficient conditions, is probably misplaced. Carving epistemic reality at the joints will not work if epistemic reality is not a neatly discontinuous, jointed entity but a graduated spectrum of possible cases. In the case of testimony (at this stage in our argument an approximately pre-theoretically identified target area), reality presents us with a paradigm case, and with a range of other cases which differ from the paradigm and each other in various epistemically relevant ways. We do best, I suggest, to characterise the paradigm case, and the mechanism by which entitled belief is sometimes acquired by the recipient of testimony in this paradigm case. We may then examine how this extends to more borderline cases.

Our selected paradigm occurs when two individuals fluent in a shared language attend to each other in personal face-to-face communication, and a speech act of intentional communication aimed at the conveying of information is made and understood: when one person tells something to another. It is no accident that we have the everyday concept of telling to cover just this kind of situation. Not all assertions, even sincere ones, are tellings: an act of telling presumes that one’s audience is previously ignorant on its topic, and aims to enlighten. Telling, however, may but need not have an instrumental purpose beyond that of passing on one’s knowledge to one’s audience. Recherche and useless facts, esoteric theory and mere gossip can be the topic of tellings, as much as information relevant to a current action plan. I propose that in our theorising we go with the everyday concept, rather than restricting ‘testimony’ to cases where what is told is relevant to some current non-epistemic interest of the audience. Humans seek and convey knowledge for its own sake, not only because it may be useful. Thus the question whether to believe what she is told arises for a hearer, whether what is told is relevant to a current project or not. So we should not build into our definition of testimony any restrictions on subject matter.

2 It must be acknowledged that one’s standard for accepting a piece of testimony as true may and should be higher, in circumstances where this is crucial to some current project, and accepting something false would have disastrous consequences. But this point applies to our standards for acceptance of putative information from any source, whether perception, memory, inference or testimony. It is not a reason to individuate testimony so as to build in this feature.
Nor should we restrict the teller’s epistemic relation to it. A basic methodological precept is not to define our topic in a way which begs or obscures epistemic questions. To restrict ‘testimony’ to cases where the speaker is an authority about her topic would mask the epistemic situation faced by the hearer. Confronted with a telling that P, a normally competent hearer will usually know, on the basis of her perception of the utterance as just that, that she has been told P. In considering the epistemic situation of the recipient of testimony, we may take as her epistemic given, her starting point, the fact that a telling with a certain content has been made to her. But she cannot know just through perception of her informant’s speech act whether the latter is an authority about her topic; this is not part of the epistemic given, but of the epistemic problem, for the hearer. The issue whether received testimony is to be trusted is obscured if we define ‘testimony’ so that only authoritative, trustworthy tellings count as such—thus building reliability into ‘testimony’ by definitional stop, but failing to capture the situation with which the hearer is typically confronted. Equally, to build into our definition that testimony provides evidence for what is testified to prejudices the key matter of the epistemic status of testimony. Nor should we define our topic so that A telling B something counts as testimony only if B believes A. Our epistemic issue is: confronted with a telling, under what circumstances should or may the hearer believe what she is told? Notice, however, that ‘telling’ is a success-concept: A pulls off her attempt to tell B something only if her act achieves its immediate object, namely if B attends to and understands A’s act, correctly grasping the content and force of A’s utterance. Only achieved, that is received, tellings enter the epistemic problem-domain of testimony. Attempted tellings which misfire in this initial respect are potential but not actual instances of testimony.

In our paradigm case, the giver of testimony tells her audience something by means of a linguistic act of literal saying. For this paradigm, there is theoretical motivation, as well as the support of ordinary language, to restrict what we count as learned through testimony to the hearer’s formation of belief in the literal content of what is asserted to her. First, ‘Whatever a person A might justifiably infer as a result of being told something by a person B’ is not a topic about which there are illuminating generalisations to be made. On any particular occasion of telling there will be all kinds of conclusions should or may the hearer believe what she is told? Notice, however, from the fact that the speaker made an assertion with a certain specific content, aiming to tell her this, but which are not reached via acceptance as true of what is asserted. Some of these inferences will not be sensitive to the specific content of the assertion—for example, that the speaker is from a certain region.

---

3 In Fricker (2002b) I argue that a hearer’s knowledge of what speech act has been made to her is typically grounded in her quasi-perception of its content and force—that is, her enjoyment of a state with the phenomenal nature and role in grounding belief of a perceptual experience. Just quasi-perceiving the content and force of the speech act does not give knowledge of trustworthiness. However, as noted below, the speaker’s manner can sometimes furnish evidence concerning this.

(judged by her accent); but others will be. Here are two examples: My companion
complains, unreasonably, that the film we are watching is a load of rubbish, from
which performance I conclude that he is in a bad mood for some other reason. My
daughter tells me that P; I know already that not-P, so do not believe her; but infer
that she has been told that P by her friend. It seems unlikely that there is a common
mechanism to be characterised here, more specific than just making a correct use of
inductive inference, or inference to the best explanation. And these are not, intuit-
ively, cases of learning something through testimony. We may talk of beliefs formed
in part from but not through testimony, to cover this broader class of cases.5

Equally, there is reason to restrict what is counted as known through testimony
to the content which is literally asserted, while acknowledging that other facts may
then be inferred from this, with the truth of what is asserted as an essential premiss
in the inference. This restriction rules out as being regarded as learned through testi-
mony those consequences of what she was told inferred by the hearer in conjunction
with existing background knowledge she possesses; and it also excludes deductive
consequences, and presuppositions. This seems unproblematic: they are learned
through testimony plus inference. This is shown in the fact that someone really bad
at elementary deductive inference, or very preoccupied, might form belief in what
was asserted, without forming belief in its logical consequences or presuppositions.

What about conversational implications of what is asserted? (These are not deduct-
ive consequences of what is asserted, but are implied by the fact that an assertion
with that content has been made, given various general norms governing assertoric
communication: for example, that the speaker should not state less than she knows
about the matter in question.) Are these learned through testimony? Is there any
reason to exclude them? One reason is that it may be difficult to find a formulation
which captures them while excluding other intuitively unwanted cases. As shown
above, the precise content of an utterance may be relevant to an inference I make
in cases we certainly do not want to count as learning through testimony. So we
cannot circumscribe which inferences count as ‘through testimony’ in this way. There
is also positive reason to exclude conversational implicatures.

There is a distinctive mechanism in operation when I form belief in what someone
explicitly tells me, through taking her word for it, when I form belief through trusting
her. Trust is the apt concept here, because someone who asserts that P in an act of
explicit telling represents P as being so. Trusting her is taking her representation of
reality at face value. Conversational implications of a speech act are not explicitly
represented in this way. Someone who tells me something which she knows to be
false has lied. Someone who says less than she knows may have been misleading,
but she has not lied, and is not culpable to the same extent. Lying, we all know, is
reprehensible. It violates a norm governing assertions. When A asserts that P to B
in an act of telling she represents P as being so, and thereby commits herself to the
truth of P, in a way that lays her open to reproach if it turns out that not-P. This
norm governing assertion applies with full force only to the literal content P which

5 A similar distinction is made in Audi (1997).
is asserted, precisely because it is that content only which A has explicitly rep-
resented to be so. One who lies is unarguably at fault, and culpable, as one who
merely omits to mention something is not. (Civil servants rely on this fact!) I con-
clude that this contrast between accepting at face value what a speaker explicitly
asserts to be so in an act of telling, versus other inferences we may draw from the
fact that she has made this act—even ones she intends us to draw—is one genuine
discontinuity in epistemic reality. The discontinuity is epistemically crucial, because
the norm of a speaker’s responsibility for the truth of what she asserts will surely
feature in our explanation of the basis of a hearer’s entitlement to trust what she is
told. Correspondingly, believing what one is told by A is described as trusting A,
in a way that forming beliefs from the fact that she has made a certain speech act
is not.

Our paradigm case of testimony is A telling B something in an act of personal
one-to-one linguistic communication. The offered act of testimony is accepted just
if B trusts A, accepting what she is told on A’s say-so. Trust is the mechanism by
which testimony spreads belief and knowledge across communities. If this is our
paradigm, what are the marginal cases which imperfectly resemble it, while diverging
on epistemically relevant features? We have concluded that, in the paradigm case,
only the literal content which is asserted should be regarded as having been learned
through testimony. But this restriction leaves other dimensions of variation from the
paradigm, and a range of cases which we may still count as extended testimony, as
we may call it. One main dimension of variation, is that the provider of testimony
may have a larger audience in mind, and the audience may not be with her. The
audience may be indefinite, or only potential. Lectures, radio and television broad-
casts extend our concept of spoken testimony. And if we move to the written word,
there are personal letters, historical narratives, textbooks in specialised subjects,
many other kinds of purportedly factual books, instruction manuals, and all kinds
of written records and other documents. Then there are personal diaries, kept perhaps
for posterity, or with no definite purpose or reader in mind. Beyond this extended
domain of actual or potential communication by means of spoken or written linguistic
acts with literal meaning, there are cases of Gricean communication which do not
use literal meaning of words as the means by which the agent’s message is got
across. All these cases, as remarked, resemble our paradigm in some respects, but
diverge in others. For instance, the epistemic relation of the hearer to her informant
is very different in these non-paradigm cases. It is easier to assess the intentions and
trustworthiness of someone whose demeanour you can observe, or whom you know,
than an anonymous writer from another century and culture. Above I suggested a
reason to confine ‘testimony’ to the literal content of a communication by literal
linguistic meaning; but there will certainly be some commonalities with more indirect
and less conventionalised ways of conveying a message.

3. The basis of entitlement

Accounts of what entitles a hearer’s formation of belief in what she is told admit
of a rough classification into reductionist versus irreducibilist theories. Reductionists
think we can explain how testimonial beliefs are justified without positing any special epistemic principle concerning testimony; irreducibilists think we cannot, and (unlike skeptics) posit such a principle. The epistemic principle (which may or may not be needed) specifies that a hearer enjoys a defeasible epistemic right to believe what she is told, without need of any empirical basis to believe her informant trustworthy on her topic. On the irreducibilist theory, a hearer’s right to believe what she is told rests not on evidence she possesses of the speaker’s trustworthiness but on an a priori epistemic principle concerning testimony—in effect, an entitlement to presume trustworthiness on no evidence. In this sense her right to trust is a priori. This a priori right to trust is, however, (clearly!) defeated when the hearer possesses evidence of the speaker’s untrustworthiness. In contrast, for the reductionist, the hearer’s right to trust the speaker must be earned by her possession of enough evidence to ground an empirically justified belief that the speaker is trustworthy—both sincere, and competent, that is, likely to be right about her topic.

In Fricker (1994) I argued that one supposed argument for the existence of such a defeasible a priori right to believe what one is told fails. Consider this transcendental argument: there is knowledge gained through testimony; adequate empirical evidence of the trustworthiness of speakers is not available without presuming some speakers trustworthy; so there could be no knowledge through testimony unless there is an a priori right to believe what one is told without evidence of the speaker’s trustworthiness; therefore there is such an a priori principle of epistemic right concerning testimony. I argued that this argument is unsound, since a hearer can often gain adequate evidence of the trustworthiness on her topic of a particular speaker; and this disaggregated ‘local’ confirmation of trustworthiness is all she needs. We masters of commonsense linguistics and speech act theory all know that a telling is true, flukes apart, only if the teller is both sincere and competent; and as practitioners of folk psychology we all know that humans are both fallible and frequently succumb to the many motives for mendaciousness. These commonsense facts provide the prima facie case against it being epistemically permissible to trust one’s informant on no evidence about her trustworthiness. It is clearly not so, unless there is a special epistemic principle to that effect, as it were flying in the face of common sense. Even if the transcendental argument for such a principle were sound, a convincing irreducibilist case would provide positive argument alongside it. In the absence of a sound transcendental argument, irreducibilists must provide some positive argument for the existence of their supposed epistemic principle.

The fact noted above, that a teller is normatively responsible for the truth of what she asserts, is a likely starting point for such a positive argument. I shall not here examine further the question whether such arguments can be made in favour of a presumptive right to believe what one is told as such. Instead, I want in the second part of this discussion to argue that, even if there is such a presumptive right to believe what one is told without evidence of trustworthiness, its significance in explaining the basis on which normally knowledgeable adult humans sometimes rightfully trust testimony is negligible, since any such entitlement to believe on no evidence is simply swamped by relevant evidence in the possession of a normally knowledgeable adult hearer.
It is debatable whether maintaining coherence in one’s belief system is sufficient either for justification or for knowledge. But it is hard to deny that doing so is necessary for justification. A belief which is flatly inconsistent with other beliefs one holds, or is in evidential conflict with them, is not a belief that one is justified in maintaining. In failing to notice the inconsistency, or in noticing it but still maintaining one’s belief, one is epistemically at fault. One implication of this point is that a believer, when she forms beliefs in response to information from either sense-perception or testimony, is subject to an epistemic requirement of bringing to bear, accessing and taking into her epistemic accounting her relevant background beliefs. If the time shown on my clock is 8am, and I form the belief that it is 8am, forgetting—failing to bring to bear my knowledge—that the clocks were put back one hour (the end of summertime) last night, and I have not yet altered mine accordingly, then my belief-formation is not only of a false belief, but is an epistemically faulty act. I arrive at a false belief not through bad luck but through epistemic neglectfulness. Similarly, if my student tells me that she could not write her essay yesterday because she was acutely ill all day with food poisoning, and I fail to bring to bear, in my epistemic response to her excuses, my memory-based knowledge that I saw her having lunch in Co-Cos yesterday, or of her previous multiply confirmed disposition to lie on such matters when it serves her interests, I am epistemically at fault. There is a general epistemic duty to maintain coherence between one’s beliefs and, as part of this, to update one’s beliefs in response to new evidence with due regard to maintaining coherence.

Once this epistemic principle of the need to maintain coherence in one’s beliefs is accepted, the question of whether there is an a priori default entitlement to believe what one is told without needing evidence of trustworthiness lapses into irrelevance in explaining the actual source of epistemic entitlement of any mature adult human’s formation of belief in response to encountered instances of testimony. Hence it will play no role in explaining the basis of the entitlement to believe each others’ reports within a scientific community. Let me explain. The default a priori entitlement whose correctness we may take as a serious question to be investigated, is an entitlement to trust the speaker on the basis of no evidence, when there is no evidence for or against her trustworthiness to hand. No one could seriously defend the thesis that there is an indefeasible entitlement to believe what one is told as such. If the hearer possesses evidence against the trustworthiness of the speaker, it is an epistemic duty to bring it to bear, in line with the general duty of maintaining coherence, epistemic ship-shapeness aboard ship, just described. It would be equally hard to deny that any reinforcing evidence—evidence in the hearer’s possession bearing positively on the question of the speaker’s trustworthiness on her topic—boosts whatever on-no-evidence entitlement to believe she may allegedly have. Once this point is also conceded, we are only one step from recognising that the existence or absence of an empirically defeasible a priori entitlement to believe what one is told vanishes into insignificance in the actual explanation of the source of entitlement of a normally knowledgeable adult hearer’s belief in what she has just been told. Our one further step is to observe that, on almost any actual occasion of testimony, a normally knowledgeable adult will be absolutely awash with relevant circumstantial evidence bearing
on the question of whether the speaker is to be trusted on her topic. She will have, in the cognitive background in light of which she approaches fresh instances of testimony, a multitude of background beliefs about human and non-human nature which are relevant to whether this fresh instance of testimony, this current invitation to believe on trust in the teller, is indeed to be trusted or not.

Any background beliefs of the hearer which are evidence, whether circumstantial or direct, against the speaker’s trustworthiness on her topic must be put onto the scales for the epistemic weighing of the reliability of the potential source of new belief, the current telling. Equally, any background beliefs which are evidence in favour of the trustworthiness of the speaker must be added on the pro-reliability side of the scales. In short, any relevant information in the possession of the hearer must properly count, and be counted, in her evaluation of the trustworthiness of the speaker. In saying this, we do no more than re-affirm the applicability to fresh instances of testimony of the point made above: that there is a general epistemic duty to police one’s beliefs for coherence. To deny this conclusion would be to insist that beliefs as it were trying to enter the hearer’s belief set by means of testimony are to be insulated against evaluation of their source through the test of coherence with the hearer’s pre-existing beliefs. An a priori principle of indefeasible entitlement to trust on no evidence, thus construed as involving indefeasibility and no-boosting, conflicts with compelling general epistemic principles, and can be dismissed forthwith.

We have admitted that any a priori entitlement to believe what one is told is liable to defeat by negative background beliefs, and to boosting by positive ones. Given this, the role of the supposed a priori principle shrinks to insignificance, in explaining how a normally knowledgeable hearer’s beliefs, formed in response to fresh instances of testimony, are entitled. Think of a heavy item, say a simple bridge consisting of a very large slab of stone, supported by many vertical columns.6 The a priori entitlement to trust we equate with just one of these columns. If there were no relevant empirical beliefs, it would be the only support, and have to bear the whole weight of the bridge (the right to trust). But in fact there are very many other columns—empirical beliefs supporting the hypothesis that the speaker is trustworthy on her topic—so that the load borne by this particular column is very small. The analogy is not perfect. The present suggestion is that in many cases an alleged a priori entitlement to trust is not just bolstered by empirical grounds for or against trust, but is entirely swamped by them, so that it becomes irrelevant, bears no weight at all. Any alleged a priori warrant to trust the speaker on no evidence is simply superceded by a rich dossier of evidence for or against trustworthiness in the hearer’s possession. This is itself an empirical claim, and cannot be fully defended in this discussion. I shall finish by making a few remarks which I hope make it seem plausible.

---

6 This useful analogy was suggested to me, regarding another case, by Ernest Sosa, in his remarks as commentator on a paper I presented at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in March 1998.
The suggestion is not (per impossibile!) that a hearer necessarily and always has an empirical basis to trust the speaker. The weaker claim made is that in many cases—and certainly in communication between co-researchers in the sciences—she will have a body of evidence bearing on the issue of the speaker’s trustworthiness, sometimes on balance negative, sometimes positive, which largely replaces the basis provided by an a priori principle. When a friend, or any person with whom one has a long-standing personal relationship, tells one something, one has knowledge of their character, abilities and past and present circumstances which bears on their trustworthiness on their topic. Equally, even if someone is personally unknown to one, knowledge of her role and status in society is highly relevant to whether she is trustworthy. One expects a hotel receptionist to know the price of the rooms, by what time they must be vacated, and so on. This example shows the key point that trustworthiness of a speaker on an occasion, and its empirical estimation, is relative to her topic. I might be less confident of the receptionist’s opinion about whether I will enjoy the film in the nearby cinema. I will be highly skeptical of her statements, as indeed of almost anyone’s, about how a lasting peace in the Middle East may be brought about.

The key general point is that an empirical basis for trusting someone does not have to be founded in personal knowledge of them, since general knowledge about the competences and weaknesses of individuals in that social role can be deployed. Equally, whether someone is to be trusted on a topic can be measured in part by one’s prior, empirically based knowledge of whether the topic is one about which people are generally trustworthy. In addition, in any face-to-face communication the manner of the teller furnishes to perception many clues as to the trustworthiness of her present assertion. (We noted earlier that this is a key disanalogy of the paradigm case with borderline ones.) The circumstances of the speaker also often furnish clues. Consider an example similar to that in Goldman (2001): if all I know is that my companion in a car tells me that the car ahead of us is red, I may believe her. But if I know that she has been blindfolded for some time, I will not do so. Any default entitlement is instantly defeated. Equally, if I see that her eyes are open, and she is looking attentively ahead, and the lighting is good, and I’ve known her for some time (hence know she has no defect of eyesight, or other relevant quirks), this empirical basis to trust her swamps any default entitlement I have.

A supposed a priori entitlement to believe what one is told as such would come into active play only in the very unusual circumstance that one knows nothing except that someone is telling one that P, or is broadcasting the purported information that P—in particular, one knows nothing about the status, situation, and hence the likely motives and competences of the teller. Even then, as remarked, the topic of the telling is itself an indicator of trustworthiness. In the sciences, co-researchers are not

---

7 The line of thought presented in this section was prompted by Goldman’s excellent paper, first presented at the 2nd annual Rutgers Epistemology Conference in April 2000.

8 There is an acute problem about evaluating the trustworthiness of information published on the internet, precisely because the situation approximates to this: one knows nothing about the teller, except that she has seen fit to publish this purported fact.
in this situation. I am not expert in the sociology of science, so my remarks here are tentative and sketchy. But, I suggest, scientists’ basis for trusting each other lies in their knowledge of each other’s commitment to, and embedding within, the norms and institutions of their profession. Unreliability is likely to be subsequently discovered and highly penalised in such a setting, and this gives one strong empirical reason, amongst others, to expect informants to be trustworthy. Scientists perforce rely on each other’s reports of their findings. But they need and surely do not do so blindly, without due regard to the rich empirical background of reasons available to them, to inform their expectations about each other’s trustworthiness or its lack. We need not invoke an a priori principle of default entitlement to trust a speaker on no evidence to explain how knowledge is co-operatively generated in the sciences.

References


