

Can Understanding Be Transmitted by Testimony?

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Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Knowledge and Understanding
- 3 Pessimism
- 4 Objections to Pessimism
- 5 Defense of Pessimism
- 6 Conclusion

Question

We acquire a vast amount of **knowledge** through **testimony**—what someone tells us, what we read in books, or what we hear in the news. Thus, testimony has the power to **transmit** knowledge, a significant epistemic value.

On the other hand, we have another significant epistemic value: **understanding**. This value, long neglected in epistemology, is now coming back into focus.

I now pose the question:

Question

Can understanding be transmitted by testimony?

Examples

Examples for consideration:

- Can a school teacher transmit their understanding of **numbers** to their students?
- Can someone who understands that **Japan is an island nation** transmit that understanding to others?
- Can your friend, a physics major, transmit their understanding of **Lagrangian mechanics** to you?
- Can a programmer who understands **why the code works** transmit that understanding to another programmer?
- Can an adult who understands **why lying is wrong** transmit that understanding to a child?
- Can someone who understands the **greatness of Mahler's symphonies** transmit that understanding to others?

Testimonial Understanding Pessimism

A popular view in epistemology is what Hazlett (2025) refers to as “**testimonial understanding pessimism**.”

Testimonial Understanding Pessimism

Understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.

One reason for pessimism's popularity is that it offers an explanation for the **distinctive value of understanding**. For example, Pritchard (2010) argues that understanding derives its value as an achievement precisely because it cannot be given by others.

However, pessimism has faced **numerous objections** in recent years (Boyd, 2017; Malfatti, 2020; Hazlett, 2025).

Objective

The objective of this presentation is to argue **two points** through an examination of testimonial understanding pessimism and the objections to it:

- ① **Testimonial understanding pessimism, as a comparative claim, is true**; that is, understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.
- ② Nevertheless, we should **revise our conception** of transmission and acknowledge that understanding can be transmitted by testimony.

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Knowledge

Epistemologists have identified at least three species of knowledge:

Knowledge

- **Propositional Knowledge** (e.g., Knowing that Tokyo is the capital of Japan)
- **Practical Knowledge** (e.g., Knowing how to ride a bicycle)
- **Knowledge by Acquaintance** (e.g., Knowing them)

The latter two are non-propositional, and these cannot be transmitted. In other words, when we say knowledge can be transmitted, we are referring to **propositional knowledge**.

As Hazlett (2025) points out, we need to be careful of merely “**linguistic**” distinctions, not “**genuine**” ones. For example, knowing “how turbines generate electricity” is an example of propositional knowledge. Just because this can be transmitted does not mean practical knowledge can be transmitted.

Propositional/Objectual Knowledge

Let me consider another type of knowledge:

- Knowing the motion of celestial bodies.
- Knowing the history of international politics.
- Knowing the impact of increased carbon dioxide on sea level rise.

These have an identical sentence structure (“knowing *object*”). We can refer to these as “**objectual knowledge**.”

There are two analyses of objectual knowledge about o :

- **A body of propositional knowledge** about o
- **Something irreducible to propositional knowledge** about o (e.g., a non-propositional representation of o)

For simplicity in this presentation, we will treat objectual knowledge as a body of propositional knowledge; that is, it can be transmitted.

Understanding

What is understanding? How is it distinguished from knowledge?

Many epistemologists agree that the core of understanding involves **grasping the relationships between pieces of information** (Zagzebski, 2001; Kvanvig, 2003; Riggs, 2003; Pritchard, 2010; Grimm, 2011).

	Knowledge	Understanding
Mental Action	Believing	Grasping
Objects	Pieces of information	Relationships between pieces of information

Table: Knowledge vs. Understanding

- Knowing that Tokyo is the capital of Japan involves **believing** that Tokyo is the capital of Japan.
- Understanding why the code works involves **grasping** the relationships that explain why the code works.

In paradigmatic cases of understanding, the objects are mainly **explanatory relationships**.

Derivatively, we can understand **phenomena, subjects, or topics** as long as they constitute a body of information with an explanatory structure.

- Understanding the motion of celestial bodies.
- Understanding the history of international politics.
- Understanding the impact of increased carbon dioxide on sea level rise.

Explanatory/Objectual Understanding

We have identified two basic type of understanding:

Understanding

- **Explanatory Understanding** (e.g., Understanding why the code works)
- **Objectual Understanding** (e.g., Understanding democracy)

There is ongoing debate about whether objectual understanding is reducible to explanatory understanding. However, for simplicity in this presentation, we will treat it as a body of explanatory understanding.

Kvanvig (2003) explains that grasping explanatory relationships is akin to gaining “**subjective justification**.”

Subjective Justification

Subjective justification obtains when persons form or hold beliefs on the basis of their own subjective standards for what is true or false.

Knowledge requires **objective** rather than subjective justification because it must be reliably linked to truth.

Understanding, on the other hand, which is characterized by grasping, requires **subjective** rather than objective justification.

For example, suppose your reliable intuition produces the belief that it will rain tomorrow. In this case, you **know** that it will rain tomorrow, but you **do not understand** it. This is because the belief is not justified to you.

Question*

We can now phrase the question more precisely:

Question*

Can

- explanatory understanding
- objectual understanding (as a body of explanatory understanding)

be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that

- propositional knowledge
- objectual knowledge (as a body of propositional knowledge)

can be transmitted by testimony?

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Pessimism as a Comparative Claim

Testimonial Understanding Pessimism

Understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.

Testimonial understanding pessimism is a **comparative claim**.

Pessimism as a Comparative Claim

Pessimism can be found in various literature:

“Knowledge can be acquired by testimony, whereas understanding cannot be. A conscientious believer can obtain a true belief on the testimony of another, and given the right conditions, can thereby acquire knowledge [...] Understanding cannot be transmitted **in that way**.” (Zagzebski, 2008, Emphasis added.)

“If you are attempting to gain knowledge, testimony can serve as the justification for your own belief, but it is not usually a good way of acquiring moral understanding. Understanding why p will not—cannot—have the **same relationship** to testimony as knowing why p .” (Hills, 2009, Emphasis added. Particularly on moral understanding.)

Pessimism, as a comparative claim, implies that understanding can be transmitted **in a sense**. Zagzebski (2008) refers to that sense:

“In fact, understanding cannot be given to another person at all **except in the indirect sense** that a good teacher can sometimes recreate the conditions that produce understanding in hopes that the student will acquire it also.” (Zagzebski, 2008, Emphasis added.)

Boyd (2017), from this, derives the principle of **indirectness**:

Indirectness

Testimony cannot be a direct source of understanding; at best, it can be an indirect source of understanding by laying the groundwork for potential understanding.

We are getting to the core of the comparative claim: that knowledge can be **directly** transmitted, while understanding cannot be directly transmitted (though it can be **indirectly** transmitted).

Asymmetry

The following example clearly illustrates this asymmetry:

“Suppose that I understand why my house burned down, know why it burned down, and also know that it burned down because of faulty wiring. Imagine further that my young son asks me why his house burned down and I tell him. He has no conception of how faulty wiring might cause a fire, so we could hardly imagine that merely knowing this much suffices to afford him understanding of why his house burned down. Nevertheless, he surely does know that his house burned down because of faulty wiring, and thus also knows why his house burned down.” (Pritchard, 2010)

In this example, the son is **directly given** knowledge by his parent, but **not** the corresponding understanding.

What Prevents Direct Transmission?

What aspects of understanding prevent its direct transmission?

Recall the idea that understanding fundamentally involves grasping the relationships between pieces of information.

	Knowledge	Understanding
Mental Action	Believing	Grasping
Objects	Pieces of information	Relationships between pieces of information

Table: Knowledge vs. Understanding

What Prevents Direct Transmission?

Grasping the relationships between pieces of information, as opposed to merely believing pieces of information, requires **significant amount of cognitive effort**. In other words, it requires:

- **Exercise of one's own cognitive abilities**
- **Active engagement in cognitive success**

These aspects cannot be directly transmitted. Therefore, we can consider that they prevent the direct transmission of understanding.

Knowledge vs. Understanding

	Testimonial Knowledge	Testimonial Understanding
Mental Action	Believing	Grasping
Objects	Pieces of information	Relationships between pieces of information
Amount of Cognitive Effort	Trivial	Significant
Engagement	Passive	Active
Credit	None	Some
Transmission	Direct	Indirect

Table: Testimonial Knowledge vs. Testimonial Understanding

Understanding as Achievement

Pritchard (2010) proposes a similar idea: understanding involves an **achievement**.

Achievement

Achievements are successes that are because of ability where the success in question either involves the overcoming of a significant obstacle or the exercise of a significant level of ability.

Testimonial Understanding Pessimism

Understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.

According to proponents of this view:

- Understanding involves grasping.
- Grasping is an achievement for which one can take credit.
- Therefore, one cannot gain understanding merely by accepting testimony, because it is not an achievement.
- On the other hand, one can gain knowledge merely by accepting testimony.
- Therefore, testimonial understanding pessimism is true.

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Pritchard's argument, which refers to achievement, is influential among pessimistic arguments, but it has faced numerous objections in recent years (Boyd, 2017; Malfatti, 2020; Hazlett, 2025).

Pritchard's argument is reconstructed as follows (Hazlett, 2025):

Achievement Argument

- 1 Understanding is an intellectual achievement.
- 2 Nothing testimonial is an intellectual achievement.
- 3 Therefore, understanding cannot be testimonial.

Their objections target both Premises 1 and 2.

On Premise 1

Premise 1

Understanding is an intellectual achievement.

The objection to this premise is made by presenting cases of “**easy understanding**.” (Boyd, 2017; Malfatti, 2020; Hazlett, 2025)

Easy Understanding

Understanding that requires no cognitive effort, no obstacles to overcome, and therefore no cognitive achievement.

Easy Understanding

Hazlett (2025) provides an example of easy understanding:

“Imagine that you come home and discover that your dog has once again chewed up your pillow – there is the pillow, all in tatters, and there is the dog, nibbling on a scrap of it. You now understand why the pillow is destroyed. But there is no intellectual achievement here – it’s just obvious to you why the pillow is destroyed. It takes no effort and there are no obstacles to overcome; you understand instantaneously and, as we might say, without even thinking about it.”

Easy Understanding

Boyd (2017) explains why understanding can be easy:

“In cases of easy understanding, all of the mechanisms that are needed to grasp the relevant information, or connections between the relevant bits of information, are already activated when processing the relevant information.” (Boyd, 2017)

Particularly, in areas where one is already proficient:

“One can ‘slot in’ new information into an already-possessed web of grasped relationships between different pieces of information.” (Boyd, 2017)

Premise 2

Nothing testimonial is an intellectual achievement.

The objection to this premise is made by arguing that **testimonial knowledge is often hard** (Boyd, 2017; Malfatti, 2020; Hazlett, 2025). According to these sources:

- 1 Knowing that p requires **believing that p** .
- 2 Believing that p requires **deploying the concepts** required to grasp the proposition that p .

This task can demand a **non-trivial amount of cognitive effort**, especially when the proposition is conceptually complex.

Conceptually Complex Propositions

Malfatti (2020) offers examples of conceptually complex propositions:

- “We cannot observe a superposition because of the phenomenon of decoherence.”
- “The National Constituent Assembly sentenced Louis XVI to death in 1793.”

Additionally, according to these sources, accepting testimony requires:

- **Interpreting utterances:** “Ambiguity, vagueness, malapropism, matters of presupposition and implication, and matters of accent, dialect, and idiolect can all contribute to make this difficult.” (Hazlett, 2025)
- **Assessing the speaker’s credibility:** To properly utilize testimony, one must assess the speaker’s “reliability” and “sincerity.” (Hazlett, 2025) While there is debate about what is required, it is certain that something is required.

These tasks can also demand a **non-trivial amount of cognitive effort**.

According to the objections to pessimism:

- Acquiring epistemic goods through testimony often demands a non-trivial amount of cognitive effort.
- Both **hard knowledge** and **easy understanding** can exist. Therefore, there is **no asymmetry** in the amount of cognitive effort between knowledge and understanding.

“I suggest that the reason why this argument [achievement argument] may seem compelling at first sight is that it draws on the wrong – or better, a biased – kind of example: namely, examples of **easy knowledge** and **hard understanding**.” (Malfatti, 2020, Emphasis added.)

Knowledge vs. Understanding

	Testimonial Knowledge	Testimonial Understanding
Mental Action	Believing	Grasping
Objects	Pieces of information	Relationships between pieces of information
Amount of Cognitive Effort	Trivial–Significant	Trivial–Significant
Engagement	Active	Active
Credit	Some	Some
Transmission	Indirect	Indirect

Table: Testimonial Knowledge vs. Testimonial Understanding

Can Understanding Be Transmitted?

Malfatti (2020) argues that whether understanding can be transmitted **depends on the conception of transmission** (cf. Grimm, 2019).

Strict Conception of Transmission

The transmission requires “*full* epistemic dependence” and “*full* epistemic credit” on the speaker.

Liberal Conception of Transmission

The transmission of *X* requires that “testimony plays a robust and salient causal role” in the acquisition of *X*. Epistemic credit can be shared between the speaker and the hearer.

If the strict conception is applied, not only understanding but also knowledge would largely not be transmitted. If the liberal conception is applied, there is no reason to consider that understanding cannot be transmitted.

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I have **no objection** to adopting the liberal conception of transmission and considering that understanding can be transmitted.

Nevertheless, I believe that **pessimism, as a comparative claim, is valid.**

Testimonial Understanding Pessimism

Understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.

I will explain the reason below.

Pritchard's Example Revisited

“Suppose that I understand why my house burned down, know why it burned down, and also know that it burned down because of faulty wiring. Imagine further that my young son asks me why his house burned down and I tell him. He has no conception of how faulty wiring might cause a fire, so we could hardly imagine that merely knowing this much suffices to afford him understanding of why his house burned down. Nevertheless, he surely does know that his house burned down because of faulty wiring, and thus also knows why his house burned down.” (Pritchard, 2010)

In this example, the son **knows** why his house burned down but **does not understand** why his house burned down.

Even though there is no asymmetry in the amount of cognitive effort between knowledge and understanding, an **asymmetry still remains** here.

Analysis of Pritchard's Example

Analysis of Pritchard's Example

p : The house burned down because of faulty wiring.

- ① The parent knows and understands that p ; that is, they are objectively and subjectively justified in believing that p .
- ② When the parent testifies to the son that p , and the son accepts it in an appropriate way, the parent's epistemic status of being **objectively justified** is **transmitted** to the son.
- ③ Therefore, the son **knows** that p .
- ④ Nevertheless, the parent's epistemic status of being **subjectively justified** is **not transmitted** to the son due to differences in their background knowledge and intellectual abilities.
- ⑤ Therefore, the son **does not understand** that p .

Argument for Pessimism

Through this analysis, I obtain a general argument for pessimism:

Argument for Pessimism

- 1 Subjective justification cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that objective justification can be transmitted by testimony.
- 2 The normative condition for knowledge is objective justification.
- 3 The normative condition for understanding is subjective justification.
- 4 Therefore, understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.

A key advantage of my argument is its ability to **accommodate both easy understanding and hard knowledge**. (Understanding requires subjective justification even if it is easy, whereas knowledge does not require subjective justification even if it is hard.)

Addressing Potential Objections

Potential Objection 1

When engaging in testimonial exchange, can't the hearer gain subjective justification based on their belief that the speaker is credible?

Yes, they can. However, that is **not** transmission because the grounds for justification that the speaker possesses are not transmitted.

Potential Objection 2

When engaging in testimonial exchange, can't the speaker transmit subjective justification by transmitting the reasons or evidence that they possess to the hearer?

Even if they can, it would be an **indirect** transmission in the sense that whether the hearer is subjectively justified depends on their background knowledge and intellectual abilities.

On the other hand, the transmission of objective justification is direct in the sense that it unconditionally succeeds if the testimonial exchange is successful.

Potential Objection 3

Doesn't knowledge, not only understanding, also require subjective justification?

I think that subjective justification is a necessary condition for higher-value knowledge, but **not** for knowledge in general.

Therefore, while testimonial knowledge often involves subjective justification, it is not knowledge due to it, but rather due to objective justification.

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Conclusion

In this presentation, I have examined testimonial understanding pessimism and the objections to it.

Testimonial Understanding Pessimism

Understanding cannot be transmitted by testimony in the same sense that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony.

I conclude that **testimonial understanding pessimism is true**, not because understanding involves achievement, but **because understanding involves subjective justification**.

Nevertheless, testimony often plays a central role in the acquisition of understanding, and I have no objection to considering it the transmission of understanding.

Further Questions

Finally, I would like to pose two more intriguing questions:

Further Question 1

Can understanding be **generated** by testimony?

(cf. Malfatti, 2019)

I think that the generation of understanding by testimony is **more acceptable** than the generation of knowledge by testimony.

- A detective **understands** the truth of a case through the testimony of several witnesses who **do not understand** it themselves.
- A detective **knows** the truth of a case through the testimony of several witnesses who **do not know** it themselves.

In any case, this question requires more detailed consideration.

Further Questions

Further Question 2

Can **wisdom** be transmitted by testimony?

While wisdom has not been as widely discussed as understanding, its epistemic value is gaining attention (Zagzebski, 1996; Whitcomb, 2010).

- Village elders imparting wisdom to the youth.
- Gaining wisdom about the good life from philosophical texts.

Considering these expressions, it seems that wisdom can be transmitted. However, in epistemology, there is a tradition of understanding wisdom as an **intellectual virtue** (Zagzebski, 1996). In that case, it seems that wisdom cannot be transmitted.

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