

## Testimonial Desire

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Question: can desires be transmitted through testimony, in the way that beliefs can be transmitted through testimony? Is there such a thing as testimonial desire, in the way that there is such a thing as testimonial belief?

Thesis: there is such a thing as belief on trust, but there is no such thing as desire on trust (i.e. no analogous thing when it comes to desire).

- This argument, sufficiently generalized, would vindicate the undefended dogma that testimony can only transmit belief.
- It provides a needed explanation of why there is no such thing as desire on trust.

Belief on trust is characterized by *trust-constitution* and a *norm of accountability*. From this, I generalize:

**Trust-constitution:** You  $\phi$  on trust only if there is someone such that your trusting them constitutes your  $\phi$ ing.

**Accountability:** You  $\phi$  on trust only if there is someone who is accountable to you for the fittingness of  $\phi$ ing.

It is an important assumption here that belief on trust requires a telling: you believe that  $p$  on trust only if someone told you that  $p$  and you believed them. When someone has an attitude on trust, we are always going to have a “speaker.”

- Note that accountability indicates a Humean explanation of why there is no such thing as desire on trust: desires cannot be fitting. But I think desires can be fitting, so this won't do for me.

Some would-be cases of desire on trust are excluded by trust-constitution and accountability:

- Inferring that what someone desires is desirable, without linguistic expression of desire: the goulash eaters.
- Inferring that what someone desires is desirable is desirable, with linguistic expression of desire: the demonstrative goulash eaters.
  - Also desires transmitted through “imitation” or conformity.
- Being told that something has some property you antecedently desire: the goulash made of wagyu beef.
  - This is how (I claim) advertising works.

I argue like this:

1. To meet the accountability condition, desire on trust would have to involve the speaker telling the hearer that something is (non-instrumentally) desirable. Consider the case of the bioethicist friend.

2. If the hearer trusts the speaker, they will thereby believe that the thing is (non-instrumentally) desirable. But they will not thereby desire the thing, because believing that something is desirable is insufficient for desiring it. So, the trust-accountability condition won't be met.

Therefore, desire on trust is impossible.

Worries:

- a. It seems like desire on trust would have to involve moral testimony or something like moral testimony. Does this (rather than the stuff about trust-constitution) explain why desire on trust is impossible? In the paper I assume it is possible to believe on trust that something is non-instrumentally desirable. Maybe that was too quick.
- b. Suppose a token attitude can be both a belief and a desire – a “besire” or “pushmi-pullyu” representation. (I'm inclined to think this is possible.) Then this seems possible: I believe on trust that biodiversity is non-instrumentally desirable, and that belief is also a desire for biodiversity. That's going to be a desire on trust.
- c. When you tell someone that p, you invite them to believe on trust that p. To avoid my dilemma (above), what we would need is a speech act that stands to desire as telling stands to belief. There doesn't seem to be any speech act like that – I consider candidates in §6 of the paper. But this seems contingent: we could have had a speech act like that. But then isn't the action here in explaining why we don't have a speech act like this? (In a previous version of the paper, I told an implausible story about this, involving innate desire.)