

## IS THERE A PROBLEM WITH COGNITIVE OUTSOURCING?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

To what extent can we rely on others for information without such reliance becoming epistemically problematic? In this paper, this question is addressed in terms of a specific form of reliance: *cognitive outsourcing*. Cognitive outsourcing involves handing over (*outsourcing*) one's information collection and processing (*the cognitive*) to others. The specific question that will be asked about such outsourcing is if there is an *epistemic* problem about cognitive outsourcing *as such*. To ask if there is an *epistemic* problem with  $x$  for  $S$  is to ask if  $x$  is a problem for  $S$ 's ability to acquire true belief and avoid false belief. To ask if there is a problem for  $S$  with  $x$  *as such* is to ask if it is impossible to solve the problem for  $S$  while leaving  $x$  as is. I argue that, if we consider the five most plausible candidate epistemic problems raised by cognitive outsourcing—i.e., unreliability, gullibility, irrationality, dependency, and lack of epistemic autonomy—we see for each candidate that it is either not an epistemic problem, or not a problem about cognitive outsourcing as such.

### 1. Introduction

It has become something of a trope in recent epistemology to point out that we depend in significant and often unavoidable ways on others for the great majority of what we know.<sup>2</sup> The trope is certainly well motivated, given that we *are* epistemically dependent on others to a very high degree. But to what extent can we rely on others without such reliance becoming epistemically problematic? In this paper, I will address this question in terms of a specific form of reliance to be referred to as *cognitive outsourcing*.

One engages in cognitive outsourcing to the extent that one hands over (*outsources*) one's information collection and processing (*the cognitive*) to

others. In order to make clear exactly what *kind* of cognitive outsourcing I will be concerned with in what follows, let us consider a specific, hypothetical scenario. Consider a person, let us call him Ted, who learns a great many things about the world from online sources, but knows nothing whatsoever about their epistemic credentials. With respect to the topics on which he consults his online sources, Ted conducts no (further) information collection, nor any processing of the input he receives from his sources, beyond whatever processing is needed for purposes of simply accepting what he's being told. In the scenario imagined, Ted is what Alvin Goldman (2001) has referred to as a *non-discriminating reflector* of his sources, in that Ted is equally likely to believe what his sources are telling him, whether they're telling him something that's true or something that's false. Moreover, Ted is *not* the kind of person that's going whichever way his sources are going because he has good reason to believe that they're reliable sources. That is, he's not a reliable judge of reliable judges on the relevant matter.<sup>3</sup> His trust in his sources is properly characterized as *blind*.

Is what Ted is doing in any way epistemically problematic? Locke, for one, suggests that 'it is not worth while to be concerned what he says or thinks, who says or thinks only as he is directed by another' (2008/1689, p. 1). This is, presumably, because the beliefs of such a person lack the relevant epistemic status. For example, some epistemologists working on testimony have suggested that the hearer must engage in some form of vetting of the speaker throughout their exchange in order to acquire *justified* testimonial belief (Fricker 2006a and 1994), and that a speaker accepting what a reliable source is telling her in the absence of positive reasons to think that the source is reliable would be *irrational* (Lackey 2008). If either of these points about justification and rationality is correct—and we will consider them as well as others at length in what follows—the kind of cognitive outsourcing practiced by Ted is bound to be problematic.

So, are these points correct? More specifically, our question will be this: Is there an *epistemic* problem about Ted's cognitive outsourcing *as such*? To ask whether something is an *epistemic* problem is to ask whether it is a problem for the subject's ability to acquire true belief and avoid false belief. I'll have more to say about this instrumentalist assumption in a moment. But first: what is it to have a problem *as such*? Consider two scenarios. In the first scenario, rather than booting up, my computer shows a screen featuring a folder with a question mark. The problem of my computer not booting up will be solved by, and only by, my replacing the crashed hard drive. For that reason, we may say that I have a problem with the hard drive *as such*. To say that I have a problem with *x as such* is to say that I cannot both solve the problem and leave *x* as is. In the second scenario, I sometimes burn my food when using a frying pan. The problem of my sometimes burning the food will be solved by my lowering the heat, using more oil or stirring the food more frequently. In this scenario, I don't have a problem with heat

as such, nor do I have one with oil or stirring as such. For each of these factors (heat, oil and stirring), I can solve the problem of my burning my food while leaving that factor as is. I do not need to attend to *all* factors to solve the problem; attending to one of them will suffice. In other words, to ask whether there is an epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing *as such* is to ask whether any such problem is more like the hard drive or the frying pan scenario, and specifically whether we may solve any epistemic problem with such outsourcing while leaving the relevant kind and degree of outsourcing as is.

In the remainder of the paper, I will argue that, if we consider the five most plausible candidate epistemic problems raised by cognitive outsourcing—i.e., unreliability (Section 2), gullibility (Section 3), irrationality (Section 4), dependency (Section 5), and lack of epistemic autonomy (Section 6)—we will see for each problem that it is either not an *epistemic* problem, or not a problem about cognitive outsourcing *as such*. This, I will conclude, suggests that there is no epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such (Section 7).

Two potential misgivings about the present investigation need to be addressed right away.<sup>4</sup> First, it might be suggested that there's something thoroughly unsurprising about its conclusion, given the underlying, instrumentalist framework. If what matters is the attainment of true belief and avoidance of error, surely the means of attainment—be it blind trust or otherwise—don't matter. However, some instrumentalists seem hesitant to embrace this conditional, and part of the motivation for the present investigation is to show that that hesitation is misguided. A good example here is Alvin Goldman, if only because he is the most prominent epistemic instrumentalist in contemporary epistemology.<sup>5</sup> Goldman (2001) suggests that blind trust is incompatible with justification and that it, if prevalent, on that account would 'leave us with testimonial skepticism concerning rational justification' (p. 86). For that reason, he sets out to identify ways that would render the testimonial exchange, and that between experts and novices in particular, 'more one of justified credence than blind trust' (p. 109). But given Goldman's instrumentalism, it's not clear why he should take there to be such a clear contrast between blind trust and justified testimonial belief. Again, if what matters is the attainment of true belief and avoidance of error, the means of attainment don't matter. That, at least, is the point the present investigation will attempt to drive home to fellow instrumentalists.

What about the non-instrumentalist? She is likely to embrace aforementioned conditional, but take it to provide a *reductio* of instrumentalism. More specifically, she might suggest that the very fact that instrumentalism entails that there is no epistemic problem as such with cognitive outsourcing of the type under consideration suggests that instrumentalism is false. I will attempt to show that that suggestion is mistaken. Elsewhere, I have argued that epistemic instrumentalism invokes the correct axiology (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013a

and *b*), provides a defensible account of epistemic justification (Ahlstrom-Vij and Dunn 2014 and forthcoming), and offers non-trivial yet plausible social epistemological recommendations (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013*c*). More to the present point, in working my way through each candidate problem for cognitive outsourcing in what follows, I hope to show that the instrumentalist's verdict in each instance is intuitively plausible, and moreover in accordance with established epistemic practices. Consequently, the worry that the instrumentalist's take on cognitive outsourcing will make for a *reductio* will turn out to lack any merit.

Without further ado, let us consider the different candidate problems.

## 2. Unreliability

As for the first potential problem, let's assume that Ted's sources are unreliable. That's an epistemic problem since it puts him at risk of forming false beliefs, in so far as he cognitively outsources to those sources. But is it a problem about cognitive outsourcing as such? I will argue that it is not.

Remember, to say that there's a problem about *x as such*, is to say that we can't both solve the problem and leave *x* as is. The problem under consideration is that of unreliable belief-formation on the part of Ted. There are (at least)<sup>6</sup> two ways to solve that problem. Either Ted has to become competent enough at evaluating testimony for him to be able to screen out false testimony, or it has to become the case that his sources are reliable testifiers. These are independently sufficient conditions for avoiding unreliable belief-formation on the part of Ted. Consequently, there is something we can do to solve the problem of unreliable belief-formation, while keeping constant Ted's cognitive outsourcing, and that is to ensure that his sources are reliable testifiers. That not only solves the epistemic problem—he will no longer be unreliable for relying on his sources in the manner that he does—but also suggests that the problem of unreliable belief-formation is not a problem about cognitive outsourcing as such. In that respect, Ted's situation is analogous to the frying pan scenario in Section 1, not the hard drive scenario.

It might be objected that seeing to it that Ted's sources are reliable is easier said than done. However, that being the case does not give us any reason to prefer improving Ted's competency when it comes to screening out false testimony to improving his sources. The reason is two-fold:

First, while certainly not a trivial task, improving the quality of people's sources is something we often do. Consider educational contexts, in which we work hard not only to ensure that the teachers involved are qualified and informed, but also that the material available to the students is accurate and informative. In so doing, we are in effect trying to construct for the students a friendly epistemic environment in which they can simply trust what

they're being told and what they're reading, in much the same way as we can imagine we are to do with Ted. Moreover, there is nothing unique about the educational context in this respect. To the contrary, given the prevalence of cognitive bias and overconfidence—including overconfidence about one's relative insusceptibility to bias—a similar strategy of constructing friendly epistemic environments will be applicable within a variety of domains. Consider, for example, the legal domain, where the role of the judge as well as a variety of procedural rules serve to ensure that the fact-finding of the jury proceeds in a manner that minimizes the role of bias and ignorance. Or consider the scientific domain, where a variety of methodological rules serves to counteract individual fallibility through a heavily curated and thereby supportive epistemic environment.<sup>7</sup>

Second, even if we grant that improving Ted's sources will be a non-trivial task, improving Ted's competency is likely to prove equally if not more difficult. For one thing, when it comes to determining someone's *sincerity*, experimental research suggests that people barely beat chance. Indeed, as noted by Timothy Levine and colleagues, 'that deception detection accuracy rates are only slightly better than fifty-fifty is among the most well documented and commonly held conclusions in deception research' (1999, p. 126). For another, when it comes to gauging someone's *competency*, in so far as the information provided by the sources falls outside of Ted's expertise (which might be the reason that he's relying on them in the first place), it will be a substantial task, to say the least, for him to acquire the knowledge necessary for determining what's true and what's false in a reliable manner.<sup>8</sup>

A more serious objection is that seeing to it that Ted's sources are reliable testifiers, as opposed to improving his discriminatory capacities, merely serves to trade one epistemic problem for another. Earlier, we compared Ted's situation to the frying pan scenario from Section 1, because, in both cases, there are several independent things we can do in order to solve the relevant problem. However, there being several independent things we can do to solve the problem is compatible with some nevertheless being preferable to others. For example, when cooking, adding more oil might be unhealthy. Similarly, we might worry that solving the problem of unreliable belief-formation by 'fixing' Ted's sources rather than Ted is problematic on account of the fact that he will remain *gullible* in trusting his sources whatever they tell him. This brings us to the second potential problem with cognitive outsourcing.

### 3. Gullibility

Assume that Ted's sources are reliable. As we have just seen, we might worry that he will nevertheless be gullible. What is gullibility? According to Elizabeth Fricker, 'the hearer should always engage in some assessment of the speaker for trustworthiness. To believe without doing so is to believe blindly,

uncritically. This is gullibility' (1994, p. 145). More specifically, Fricker suggests that a person is gullible 'if she has a disposition or policy for doxastic response to testimony which fails to screen out false testimony' (2006a, p. 620), and accepts Goldberg and Henderson's (2006) interpretation to the effect that a person is gullible if she 'is disposed to acquire a good deal of unreliable (unsafe; insensitive; etc.) testimony-based belief' (p. 602). Since Ted's sources are reliable, and he accepts whatever they tell him, he is not gullible in the sense of being unreliable. But maybe he is gullible in the sense of forming *unsafe* or *insensitive* beliefs? Let us consider each possibility in turn.

### 3.1. Lack of safety

Following Ernest Sosa (2007), we may take an unsafe belief to be a belief that, while true in the actual world, 'might [...] too easily have been false though formed on the same experiential basis' (p. 3). A classic example of unsafe belief is provided by Goldman's (1976) fake barn scenario, where a person happens to perceptually single out the only genuine barn in a district that, unbeknownst to her, is populated almost exclusively by fake but very convincing-looking barns. The perceptual belief she forms as a result ('That's a barn', say) is true, and perhaps even reliably formed, but unsafe on account of how relying on the same perceptual processes in nearby worlds easily could've issued in a false belief.

By the same token, Ted's beliefs will be unsafe if his sources just happen to be located and epistemically related in such a fortuitous way that they consistently end up not leading him astray; had the world been just slightly different, the delicate epistemic circumstances underpinning their status as reliable sources would be destroyed. That would be an epistemic problem for Ted in the actual world, in that it would imply a *modal* risk of having him form false beliefs, despite his sources being reliable in the actual world, and there as such not being any *probabilistic* risk of false belief for him. But the question remains: would such a modal risk constitute an epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing *as such*?

The answer is 'no', since reliability across nearby worlds implies safety. More specifically, if Ted's sources are reliable across nearby worlds, and we hold constant the experiential basis for Ted's beliefs in those worlds—i.e., across nearby worlds, Ted forms his beliefs by simply taking on board whatever his sources are telling him—then the beliefs he form in the actual world might not too easily have been false. Note that 'Ted's sources' are here to be read non-rigidly. In other words, Ted is not necessarily relying on the same sources in nearby world as in the actual world. Consequently, saying that Ted's sources are reliable across nearby worlds is to say that, whatever sources Ted is relying on in the actual or in nearby possible worlds, those sources are reliable.

Moreover, the fact that reliability across nearby worlds implies safety means that, if Ted's sources are *not* reliable across nearby worlds, and he on that account can be said to be gullible in a manner that has him form unsafe beliefs, then that will constitute an *epistemic* problem—it puts him at (modal) risk of forming false beliefs—but not an epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing *as such*. This is because unsafe belief-formation can be avoided either by having Ted be competent in evaluating testimony across nearby worlds, or—as just noted—by having his sources be reliable testifiers across nearby worlds. Consequently, there is something we can do to solve the problem of unsafe belief-formation, while keeping constant Ted's cognitive outsourcing, and that is to ensure that his sources are reliable testifiers across nearby worlds.

Of course, seeing to it that Ted's sources are reliable across nearby worlds is by no means a trivial task—but neither is seeing to it that Ted is a competent evaluator of testimony across nearby worlds. In this respect, a point perfectly analogous to the one made above about the comparative difficulty of 'fixing' Ted's sources versus 'fixing' Ted applies here, too. In particular, ensuring that sources are reliable across nearby worlds is something we often do. Return to the education example from Section 2. Not only do we strive to ensure that teachers are competent and teaching material is accurate, but we also make sure that, were a teacher to get sick, the substitute teacher would be competent, too; and were the primary textbooks to go missing, the other books available in the school library would also be accurate and informative; and so forth. And when we do so, we are protecting the safety of the students' beliefs, by making sure that they would be reliably formed, not only in this world, but also in nearby possible worlds. Again, while not a trivial task, it is a task we often take on, and one that it moreover would seem unreasonably pessimistic to suggest that we don't often succeed in.

### 3.2. *Two types of insensitivity*

A line of thought analogous to the one that we just applied to the modal risk of unsafe belief-formation can be used to address the related concern that Ted's cognitive outsourcing is an epistemic problem on account of Ted not being *sensitive to defeaters*, i.e., to considerations speaking against his beliefs. Remember, Ted's trust in his sources can be properly characterized as blind. But why is that a problem? After all, since Ted's sources are reliable, it is unlikely that there will be any defeaters for Ted to pick up on, and as such likely that Ted will pick up on any defeaters that there are, namely *none*. However, according to Lackey (2008), the problem with agents *trivially* satisfying any defeater condition in this manner is that doing so 'does not indicate any sort of sensitivity on the part of the subject to evidence either for or against her own beliefs' (p. 199). Since deferring blindly, Ted is not

sensitive in this manner. Does that make for an epistemic problem about his cognitive outsourcing as such?

Insensitivity to defeaters is an epistemic problem for Ted, if it puts him at risk of forming false beliefs. Since his sources are reliable, his insensitivity to defeaters does not put him at any significant risk of forming false belief in the *actual* world. However, he might still be at risk in the modal sense that, if there *were* any defeaters, he would not have picked up on them. If that is an epistemic problem, there are two ways to solve it: either Ted has to become sensitive to evidence for or against his beliefs across nearby worlds, or his sources need to become reliable testifiers across nearby worlds. Consequently, there is something we can do for purposes of avoiding the risk of forming false beliefs, while keeping constant Ted's cognitive outsourcing, and that is—yet again—to ensure that his sources are reliable testifiers across nearby worlds. That suggests that any problem on the part of Ted about the relevant kind of insensitivity to defeaters is not a problem about cognitive outsourcing as such.

That said, there is a different, modal notion of sensitivity available in the literature, defended at one point by Robert Nozick (1981, p. 179) in his account of knowledge, to the effect that a belief that  $p$  on the part of  $S$  is sensitive if and only if, if  $p$  were false,  $S$  would not believe that  $p$ . Alternatively, sensitivity might be understood in terms of the agent not being *likely* to believe that  $p$  if false, as suggested by Sosa (2007, p. 25). Is *insensitivity*, in this sense, a problem for Ted?

It's not clear that it is. More specifically, if it is a problem, it is not a problem about epistemic outsourcing as such. After all, in so far as insensitivity is a problem for Ted, it's possible to solve the problem by making sure that Ted's sources are perfectly or highly reliable across all worlds, while leaving Ted's cognitive outsourcing as is. It might be objected that, in contrast with steps that can be taken with respect to nearby worlds, it's simply not *feasible* to see to it that Ted's sources are perfectly or highly reliable across all worlds. But this point cuts both ways, as the same would go for seeing to it that Ted himself becomes perfectly or highly reliable in the relevant domains across all worlds. That is why any difficulties involved in securing the relevant level of reliability does not provide an argument against cognitive outsourcing, so much as an argument for a kind of skepticism. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that few epistemologists today are attracted to this idea of modal sensitivity in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, there is no problem about gullibility on account of unreliability, since Ted's sources are reliable, and to the extent that there is a problem about gullibility on account of unsafe belief-formation, an insensitivity to defeaters, or an insensitivity of the kind discussed by Nozick, that is for the reasons provided above not an epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such.



#### 4. Irrationality

Let us assume that Ted's sources are reliable across nearby worlds, in line with what was argued in Section 3. Even so, we might worry that it's somehow *irrational* for him to trust his sources, in so far as he does not know anything about their credentials, and as such lacks *positive reason* to believe that his sources are reliable. Lackey (2008) suggests as much in relation to a case very similar to that of Ted's—a case she borrows from Fricker (2002). Lackey asks us to imagine 'a person receiving testimony over the internet, with absolutely no epistemically relevant information about the source of the testimony' (2008, p. 170, fn. 32). To trust the source under these conditions would be irrational, according to Lackey.

Whether that is correct depends on what we mean by 'irrational', of course.<sup>10</sup> The term 'irrational' is sometimes applied to actions, and specifically to actions that are detrimental to the actor's ends. That, however, is not the notion relevant here, as we—Lackey included—for present purposes are interested in irrationality in an *epistemic* (or theoretical) rather than practical sense. A better candidate is therefore epistemic irrationality as *doxastic inconsistency*. However, since the case imagined above does not involve Ted believing any contradiction, that notion of irrationality cannot be the one relevant here either. A third candidate notion identifies epistemic irrationality with what it is *reasonable* for the agent to believe, given her evidence. The problem with invoking this notion, however, is that it amounts to simply restating the original demand for positive reasons, as follows: As far as Ted's (non-existent) evidence is concerned, he lacks any reason to consider his source reliable. However, this observation goes no lengths whatsoever towards answering the question relevant here, namely: Why should we take the absence of such reasons to indicate any irrationality on his part?

One possible answer is that there is something *epistemically blameworthy* about trusting sources when one lacks any positive reasons for thinking them reliable. The relevant target of blame in Lackey's example is the subject's *acceptance* of the relevant reports,<sup>11</sup> where I take it that the relevant kind of acceptance involves the subject *believing* what is reported. However, we can only be blamed for what is up to us, and belief-formation is not up to us—belief formation is something that *happens* to us rather than something that we *do*—given the truth of doxastic involuntarism, so that cannot be it either.<sup>12</sup>

It might be argued that Ted is blameworthy, not for *believing* what his sources are telling him, but for not *seeking out information* about their epistemic credentials, and clearly the latter is within his voluntary control. However, given that his sources are reliable—indeed, even reliable across nearby worlds—it's not clear what the point of such blame is supposed to be. Say that Ted did what we're supposedly to blame him for not doing, i.e., seek out

the relevant information. If he does a *good* job, he'll find that his sources, indeed, are reliable, and that he on that account should keep outsourcing to them. In that scenario, he'll be *no better off* epistemically for having put in the relevant work. If anything, he has wasted time and effort for no epistemic gain. If, by contrast, he does a *bad* job, and reaches the (false) conclusion that his sources are *not* reliable, he might very well be epistemically *worse off* for having put in the work, since that might lead him either to outsource to other, potentially unreliable sources, or to try to settle the questions previously left to his sources on his own, and quite possibly do a worse job than his reliable sources do. In other words, in blaming him in the relevant manner, we seem to be encouraging Ted not to do better than he currently is, and to potentially do worse. For that reason, it's not clear that it makes any sense to blame Ted in the situation imagined.

Another possible answer grants the above point about epistemic blameworthiness, but calls attention to the fact that there is still something *epistemically valuable* about rationality. This answer calls our attention to the possibility of rationality being related to our epistemic goals in either of two ways. On the one hand, rationality might be related to our epistemic goals *instrumentally*. In that case, however, our pursuit of rationality should fall in line with our pursuit of truth, with the consequence that Ted is *not* irrational for trusting his sources, since they after all are reliable. On the other hand, rationality might be taken to be an epistemic goal in its own right. If so, it might be that Ted is irrational when believing on the basis of the online communications from his sources in the sense that, while doing so might promote his reliability, it fails to promote some separate, *sui generis* goal of rationality. As I have argued elsewhere, however, it is not clear that we have reason to assume any epistemic goals beyond the dual goal of believing truly and not believing falsely.<sup>13</sup>

None of this is to deny that we might often go astray when trusting someone despite lacking positive reason to think her trustworthy. Still, it is a mistake to promote that *empirical generalization* (which might or might not be well-founded) to a *conceptual truth* about rationality, particularly given that it's not clear that there's a viable notion of rationality that generates the verdict that Ted would be irrational for trusting his sources while lacking positive reasons to believe that they are reliable. And if that's so, it's also not clear that there is an epistemic problem of irrationality about cognitive outsourcing, let alone about cognitive outsourcing as such.

## 5. Dependency

Assume, yet again, that Ted's sources are reliable across nearby worlds. If what has been argued so far is correct, there is under that assumption no problem of gullibility about cognitive outsourcing as such, nor does there

seem to be a sense in which Ted is irrational for trusting his sources in the absence of positive reasons for considering them reliable. Still, we might worry that his situation involves a problematic form of epistemic dependency. That Ted depends on his sources should be uncontroversial. But we depend on others in all kinds of ways—I depend in very real ways on my spouse, for example—and not all relations of dependency are problematic. Consequently, for the relevant worry to have any bite, we need to identify some way in which the kind of dependency manifested by Ted is *unhealthy*.

The worry cannot be that Ted's dependency is unhealthy on account of bringing him to form false belief, and as such rendering him unreliable. Again, we are assuming that his sources are reliable. But maybe the worry is that we cannot all be like Ted. After all, some of us have to conduct inquiry on our own, in order for others to be able to outsource their information collection and processing. While that's true, however, it does not go to show that there's anything objectionable about the arrangement imagined in the case of Ted. More specifically, while it goes to show that there is dependency, it does not go to show that there is anything *unhealthy* about that dependency. Just consider our dependency on scientific experts within a wide variety of domains. Is that dependency worrisome, just because the relevant expert-laymen arrangement would be impossible in the absence of experts? It's not clear that it is. It certainly would be worrisome if the relevant experts were leading us astray. But that's not a worry about dependency; that's a worry about unreliability, and as noted above there's no worry about unreliability in Ted's case.

Maybe the worry is that, were Ted's sources to disappear, that would be bad, since he in that case would run the risk of outsourcing to unreliable sources. But that cannot be it either. Remember, 'Ted's sources' should be read non-rigidly. Consequently, while the particular sources that Ted is relying on in the *actual* world might not be present in nearby possible worlds, in so far as Ted is forming beliefs in a safe manner by outsourcing his information collection and processing, there will in those worlds be other sources fulfilling the same function. Consequently, we can infer from the safety of his cognitively outsourced belief-formation that, whatever the identity of the sources he would be outsourcing to in nearby worlds, those sources are reliable.

What if Ted is not forming beliefs in a safe manner? In that case, we're back to the worry discussed in relation to gullibility and safety above (Section 3.1). As was noted there, there are two ways of solving the epistemic problem of Ted forming beliefs in an unsafe manner, namely by either seeing to it that Ted becomes competent at evaluating testimony across nearby worlds, or by ensuring that his sources are reliable across nearby worlds. Add to this the observation that we don't necessarily hold his sources constant across possible worlds (i.e., the sources he relies on in the *actual* world might not be identical to the ones he relies on in *nearby* worlds), and we may

conclude that, in so far as lack of safety on account of cognitive outsourcing is an epistemic problem, it's not an epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such. And, again, while it would not be a trivial task to see to it that Ted's sources are reliable across nearby worlds, it's something we often do successfully.

## 6. Lack of Epistemic Autonomy

At several points in the above, I've suggested that there are two ways of solving epistemic problems, namely by seeing to it that Ted becomes competent at evaluating the testimony of his sources, or ensuring that his sources are reliable (possibly across nearby worlds). Someone skeptical about cognitive outsourcing might suggest that this leaves out a third, more desirable option: having Ted conduct the relevant lines of inquiry on his own, without relying on his sources. That option is more desirable, it might be argued, on account of how it involves Ted manifesting *epistemic autonomy* of a kind that's more or less completely absent in cases where he's engaging in cognitive outsourcing, and only present to a modest degree in cases where he's relying on his sources while competently evaluating them for trustworthiness. Which raises a question: what exactly is it to be epistemically autonomous?<sup>14</sup>

### 6.1. *The dual-aspect conception of epistemic autonomy*

According to Fricker (2006*b*), an epistemically autonomous person 'takes no one else's word for anything but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties and investigative inferential powers' (p. 225). Similarly, Linda Zagzebski (2007) suggests that an epistemically autonomous person that finds out that someone else believes *p* 'will demand proof of *p* that she can determine by the use of her own faculties, given her own previous beliefs, but she will never believe anything on testimony' (p. 252). In light of these characterizations, we may distinguish between two aspects of epistemic autonomy, one negative and one positive. As for the *negative* aspect, the epistemically autonomous individual does not rely on the word of others. As for the *positive* aspect, what she does instead is conduct her own inquiry, while relying only on her own epistemic capabilities and resources. Let us refer to this as *the dual-aspect conception of epistemic autonomy*.

It is surprisingly difficult to find any defenders of this conception. The two most plausible candidates are Locke and Kant. Consider Locke's (2008/1690) famous contention that '[t]he floating of other Men's Opinions in our brains makes us not one jot more knowing, though they happen to be true' (p. 52)—a contention that has C. A. J. Coady (1992) characterize Locke as a representative of 'an individualist ideology' (p. 13). This speaks

to the negative aspect of epistemic autonomy. Indeed, Alvin Plantinga (2000) describes Locke as part of an Enlightenment culture that ‘looked askance at testimony and tradition’ and moreover suggests that ‘Locke saw [testimony and tradition] as a preeminent source of error’ (p. 147). Finally, consider Immanuel Kant’s (1951/1790) claim that one of the three maxims of *sensus communis* and the very motto of the Enlightenment is to ‘think for oneself’ (pp. 294–5). This speaks to the positive aspect of epistemic autonomy. By implication, it also speaks to the negative aspect, at least if we’re to trust Frederick Schmitt (1987), who argues that, according to Kant, ‘testimonial evidence is not the sort of thing on which an intellectually autonomous subject would rely’ (p. 46).

However, Joseph Shieber has argued that these readings greatly exaggerate Kant and Locke’s hostility towards testimony. According to Shieber (2010), Kant’s emphasis on the need to think for oneself is restricted to the philosophical, moral, and mathematical. More than that, on empirical matters, Kant leaves room for a *prima facie* entitlement to believe the assertions of others, in a manner not too different from modern anti-reductionists about testimony.<sup>15</sup> Shieber (2009) also argues that the passage regarding ‘[t]he floating of other Men’s Opinions in our brains’ concerns only ‘rational and contemplative knowledge’, or what we today might refer to as *philosophical* knowledge. Moreover, as to testimony on empirical matters, the key word is ‘Opinions’, since Locke, according to Shieber, leaves ample room for the *knowledge* of others providing a proper epistemic ground for testimonial belief.

Perhaps it shouldn’t come as a surprise that it’s hard to find any defenders of the dual-aspect conception. After all, it’s a very easy epistemological target. As Inwood (2005) writes, the ‘demand that an individual should subject all his beliefs to criticism, and accept nothing on authority [. . .] is thwarted by the gulf between any given individual’s meagre first-hand experience and the range of knowledge now available to him’ (par. 5). Similarly, Plantinga (2000) points out that ‘you can’t know so much as your name or what city you live in without relying on testimony’ (p. 147). Indeed, for the great majority of things that we know about phenomena beyond our immediate temporal and geographical location, we depend on others for our knowledge, and this epistemic debt to others could be cashed in only at an exorbitant cost. As John Hardwig (1985) notes, ‘if I were to pursue epistemic autonomy across the board, I would succeed only in holding uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore *irrational* beliefs’ (p. 340).

## 6.2. *Epistemic autonomy as an ideal to aspire to*

At this point, the defender of the dual-aspect conception of epistemic autonomy might grant that most of us would probably be far worse off epistemically if we tried to rely only on our own limited epistemic capacities in

finding out things about the world, but maintain that this does not go to show that epistemic autonomy is not still an ideal to aspire to. And what is problematic about cognitive outsourcing of the kind Ted is engaging in, she might argue, is exactly that it prevents us from aspiring to this ideal.

However, there are reasons to think that epistemic autonomy, in the dual-aspect sense, is *not* an ideal to aspire to, at least not for creatures like us. For something to constitute an ideal, that something would arguably have to be maximally good along some relevant dimension. For the sake of argument, let us assume what is far from obviously true, namely that epistemic autonomy is an ideal in this sense. Even on that assumption, it doesn't follow that we have reason to aspire to epistemic autonomy. To see why, consider an analogy with political systems. In particular, imagine some ideal political state. Then, assume that the only way to move from our current state to the ideal state is by way of a violent and bloody revolution. Given these assumptions, we have a situation wherein some state is ideal without it being the case that we have reason to aspire for it. In fact, if the means required to realize the ideal state are violent and bloody enough, we might even have reason *not* to aspire for that state.

An analogous point can be made about epistemic autonomy. Even if we assume that *being* epistemically autonomous is an ideal—and we are, as noted above, granting that assumption for the sake of argument—it does not follow that we should *aspire to become* epistemically autonomous. The reason has already been provided in Section 6.1: for limited creatures like us, attempting not to rely on the word of others, and to instead conduct our own lines of inquiry while relying only on our own competencies and abilities, is likely to make us epistemically worse off by a significant margin than we are when allowing ourselves to rely on others. As a result, even if being in a state of epistemic autonomy would in fact have us inhabit some ideal epistemic state, the high epistemic cost of attempting to *become* epistemically autonomous gives us strong reason *not* to attempt to approximate that state.

Consequently, even if we assume that epistemic autonomy is an ideal, the fact remains that, since the epistemic cost of achieving epistemic autonomy is forbidding, and we on that account don't have reason to aspire for such autonomy, it's not clear that there's anything objectionable about Ted being prevented from aspiring thus. For that reason, the objection under consideration doesn't give us any reason to think that there's an epistemic problem about epistemic outsourcing on account of it preventing us from aspiring to that ideal, assuming it is in fact an ideal.

### 6.3. *Epistemic autonomy as appropriate dependence*

What was argued in Section 6.2 counts against the idea that the dual-aspect conception of epistemic autonomy designates an ideal to which we have

reason to aspire. In fact, we might even have positive reason *not* to aspire to it, given the epistemic costs of so doing. But maybe there is a different, more plausible notion of epistemic autonomy on offer.

Consider Robert Roberts and Jay Wood's (2007) conception of epistemic autonomy. Roberts and Wood are sensitive to the point that, if we take autonomy to be a matter of an individual going about her epistemic business in a manner that involves taking no direction from others, '[t]he prospects of [...] an "autonomous" individual having any light on anything are dim indeed' (p. 260). For this reason, Roberts and Wood incorporate a normative element into their notion of autonomy, rendering dependence on others perfectly compatible with autonomous agency. An autonomous individual, they suggest, is an individual 'who has been, and continues to be, *properly* regulated by others' (p. 260), and when it comes to trusting the word of others, 'the autonomous individual is disposed to be cautious about testimony in whatever way is *right* for the circumstances—sometimes very cautious, sometimes implicitly trusting' (p. 270; emphasis added).

One clear virtue of Roberts and Wood's notion of epistemic autonomy is that it does not place any unreasonable demands on our abilities to conduct inquiry in isolation from others. Might their notion even be able to accommodate Ted? Given the reliability of Ted's sources, together with our failure to identify any problem with Ted's cognitive outsourcing in the above, to be *appropriately* dependent on others for Ted is compatible with being *very* dependent on others. As such, Roberts and Wood's notion of epistemic autonomy is not incompatible with cognitive outsourcing. Indeed, if to be epistemically autonomous is to be appropriately dependent on others, and practicing cognitive outsourcing serves to improve one's epistemic situation, it might even be that such outsourcing may serve to *increase* one's autonomy. In other words, Roberts and Wood's notion of epistemic autonomy is perfectly compatible with cognitive outsourcing.<sup>16</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Section 6 argued that available notions of epistemic autonomy designate phenomena that are either perfectly compatible with cognitive outsourcing, or such that we lack reason to aspire to attain them. As such, it seems there is no epistemic problem relating to a lack of epistemic autonomy for cognitive outsourcing of the kind Ted engages in. Factoring in what has been argued in the preceding sections, we may thereby conclude that there is no epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such on the grounds of unreliability, gullibility, irrationality, dependency, or lack of epistemic autonomy. In each of these cases, we are either not dealing with an epistemic problem (irrationality, dependency, and lack of epistemic autonomy), or not dealing with an epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such (unreliability and

gullibility). As noted at the outset, this hopefully goes some way towards convincing the epistemic instrumentalist to embrace the idea that, if what truly matters is the attainment of true belief and avoidance of error, the means of attainment—including blind trust—don't matter, while also showing that the instrumentalist's take on cognitive outsourcing doesn't provide a *reductio* of her framework, given how its implications coincide with established epistemic practices. Naturally, since there might be other problems with cognitive outsourcing that I have not discussed, I do not want to suggest that I have conclusively demonstrated that there is no epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such. However, given that the candidate problems discussed above seem the strongest candidates for constituting such problems, the fact that none of them do is good evidence that there is no epistemic problem about cognitive outsourcing as such.

## Notes

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2. Goldman (1999), Coady (1992) and Hardwig (1985) have all been instrumental in bringing our epistemic dependence on others to the fore of epistemological theorising. That dependence has been investigated more recently in relation to testimony (e.g., Lackey and Sosa 2006; Lackey 2008; Goldberg 2010) and peer disagreement (e.g., Feldman and Warfield 2010; Christensen and Lackey 2013), although some of the themes stretch all the way back to Hume and Reid.
3. See Coady (2006), who argues that you can be a non-discriminating reflector while still being a reliable judge of reliable judges. (A similar point is made by Lackey 2013.) I will not take a stand on that issue here; it suffices to note for present purposes that, if there can be such non-discriminating reflectors, Ted is not *that* kind of non-discriminating reflector.
4. Many thanks to Chris Kelp for raising these.
5. See, in particular, Goldman (1999) for an account of Goldman's instrumentalist framework.
6. The point of this qualification will become apparent in section 6.
7. See Ahlstrom-Vij (2013c) for a sustained argument in defense of these types of practices in many legal, medical and scientific contexts.
8. Hence, according to Hardwig (1985), the central role of *trust* in layman-expert interactions. This is compatible with there being indirect strategies for gauging the reliability of experts by laymen, e.g., along the lines suggested by Goldman (2001). However, as Goldman himself acknowledges, this is by no means a trivial task: 'the situations facing novices are often daunting' and raise questions about '[w]hat kinds of education, for example, could substantially improve the ability of novices to appraise expertise' (p. 109).
9. See Sosa (1999) for a classic critique of the idea that knowledge requires sensitivity, and a defense of a safety condition on knowledge. In later work, Sosa (2007)



- has rejected the idea that safety is required for knowledge, in order to solve the problem of dream skepticism.
10. The following line of reasoning develops an argument originally presented in Ahlstrom-Vij (2015).
  11. See Lackey (2008, p. 170).
  12. See, e.g., Alston (2005). See also Nottelmann (2006) for a discussion of some dissenting voices, as well as further arguments to the effect that doxastic voluntarism is and remains implausible. What if we read Lackey as being concerned with something like Cohen's (1989) notion of *acceptance*, as a voluntary adoption of some proposition as a premise in one's deliberation? So long as accepting what's true is not a fundamental epistemic goal—and I see no reason to think that it is—any practice of praising or blaming someone for what they accept would simply be an instrument to getting people to believe what's true and steering them away from what's false. And if so, it's not clear what reason we would have for blaming Ted, given that his sources are in fact reliable, and as such are directing him well.
  13. See Ahlstrom-Vij (2013a).
  14. Parts of what follows reworks arguments developed in Ahlstrom-Vij (2013c).
  15. See, e.g., Burge (1993).
  16. It might be objected that Roberts and Jay's reference to *reasonable* guidance by others (e.g., 2007, p. 267) should be taken to imply that those guided need positive reason to believe that their guides are reliable on the relevant matters—which, as we have seen, is something that Ted lacks. However, for reasons discussed in Section 4, it's not clear that this makes for an epistemic problem.

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