ABSTRACT

WHEN TO TRUST AUTHORITATIVE TESTIMONY: GENERATION AND TRANSMISSION OF
KNOWLEDGE IN SAADYA GAON, AL-GHAZĀLĪ, AND THOMAS AQUINAS

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People have become suspicious of authority, including epistemic authorities, i.e., knowledge experts, even on matters individuals are unqualified to adjudicate (e.g., climate change, vaccines, or the shape and age of the earth). This is problematic since most of our knowledge comes from trusting a speaker—whether scholars reading experts, students listening to teachers, children obeying their parents, or pedestrians inquiring of strangers—such that the knowledge transmitted is rarely personally verified. Despite the recent development of social epistemology and theories of testimony, this is not a new problem.

Ancient and Medieval philosophers largely took it for granted that most human knowledge primarily comes from listening to a trustworthy speaker whose virtuous character serves to mitigate against the twin concerns of inaccuracy and dishonesty. Thus, unlike contemporary Social Epistemology, few testimonial theories were explicitly laid out despite the crucial role testimony plays throughout a wide range of topics and teachings. To date, the working theory of testimony underpinning the works of medieval philosophers are just now being codified. This is particularly relevant for the Abrahamic faiths since they originate with testimony from God himself. The goal of this dissertation is to explore how the generation and transmission of religious knowledge (i.e., testimonial theory) appears in an exemplary thinker from each faith: Saadya (Sa'adiah) Gaon of Judaism (882-942), al-Ghazālī of Islam (1058-1111), and Thomas Aquinas of Christianity (1225-1274). While not contemporaries, these exemplars are theological philosophers who are like-minded in their desire to maintain an orthodox faith while possessing philosophical approaches to truth. Thus, they maintained sophisticated epistemological theories of generation and transmission within their own religious contexts (e.g., revelation, scripture, and prophecy).

Cataloguing these medieval testimonial theories reveals a historical incongruity with the current contemporary concept of testimony and its frameworks. Based on the testimonial theories of these three thinkers, I argue for a "transhistorical" concept of testimony that does not presume an evidentialist framework to account for pre-modern theories of testimony which predominantly rely on virtue theoretic frameworks. To test the proposed neutral framework, I offer a virtue epistemological account of testimony in which trust is not an intellectual virtue, but the intellectual aspect of the historic virtue of autonomy. I argue that intellectual autonomy and trust are inversely related in one's interactions with authority (both practical and theoretical).