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On the Rationality of Word-Taking

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Abstract

It is rather commonly assumed that “trustworthiness” is a trait among others and can be appraised with evidence, although trust may go *beyond* evidence in some cases. It is also rather commonly assumed that a sort of estimation of a speaker’s trustworthiness is needed when a person’s word is rationally taken. However, it has recently been argued that the idea of estimating a person’s trustworthiness by assessing evidence is problematic. Maybe (1) it is questionable to estimate “trustworthiness” by applying the usual methods that investigate a person’s past verbal and other behavior? And perhaps (2) there are cases in which it is rational to take another person’s word even if one does not vindicate one’s belief in a word-giver’s trustworthiness by assessing evidence? In this paper, I briefly discuss these two objections and argue that they both fail. The objections do not show that in ordinary conversations people cannot estimate a speaker’s trustworthiness simply by assessing evidence, nor that it can be rational to take another person’s word and believe her even in cases where one does not vindicate one’s view about the speaker’s trustworthiness by assessing evidence.

Telling and Word-Taking

When a person *tells* you something, say “I was at the movies yesterday,” you are provided with a reason to believe that. The reason may not be very good, but you have it, just because someone has simply told how things are. Telling is more than reporting one’s beliefs (Ross 1986, 72). When a person tells us something, she also implicitly offers a guarantee that this is so. She assures that what she says is true and assumes responsibility for the acceptability of her claim. By telling, she gives her word and invites us to trust her.¹ At least in principle, we can blame her should we find out that we got wrong information (Hinchman 2005, 562; Moran 2006, 295).² Telling alters a speaker’s responsibilities, just as promises and explicit agreements may change them (Moran 2006, 289; Hawley 2019, 50; Watson 2004; Friedrich and Southwood 2011). Suppose that we could reveal what beliefs a person has by secretly using a handy brain scanner. It would not be fair to blame her should we notice that we were thus misled and formed wrong beliefs. She would not be responsible for telling us falsehoods if she has told us nothing. In the absence of a *decision to tell*, we would not have a right to complain. This shows that when someone tells us something, the question is not merely about *evidence* of the possible fact that ‘this is so.’ Although people can and sometimes

¹ Carson (2010, 36) writes that “[w]arranting the truth of a statement presupposes that the statement is being used to invite or influence belief. It does not make sense for one to guarantee the truth of something that one is not inviting or influencing others to believe.”

² Moran’s paper was originally published in 2005 in *Philosopher’s Imprint*.

do treat what other people tell them as evidence, they normally learn things simply by taking the speaker's word.³

Of course, a rational person does not believe whatever she is told if she has no idea about the *trustworthiness* of the speaker. But often we have some idea, either because we do not have any evidence that the speaker is untrustworthy or because we have a reason to think she is sincere and possesses relevant knowledge (Hinchman 2005, 578–579; Moran 2006, 289). We can estimate a speaker's trustworthiness and use all the evidence we happen to have, however weak it may be (“usually strangers that give directions do not lie”). This process is natural and usually goes unnoticed, and it does not mean that, after all, we are using what we hear merely as evidence for what we are being told. Our typical relation to what we are told is non-evidential, although we have tacitly evaluated the speaker by using some evidence. The speaker's guarantee that her claim is true is what counts, but her words and intentions do not, in themselves, give us a reason to believe her.⁴ If someone tells you that it is cold outside and you believe it, then it is natural to say, if asked, that you believe it because you were just told. But what you really mean is that you believe it because you were told, *and* you have some grounds to think that the speaker is trustworthy (or at least you do not have grounds to think that she is untrustworthy) and you do not see an overriding reason to doubt what she says (Moran 2006, 289; Moran 2018, 58).⁵

This picture of everyday conversations may seem innocent and obvious. And perhaps the picture *is* innocent and obvious. However, it has recently (and before) been argued that the idea of estimating a person's trustworthiness by assessing evidence is problematic (Dannenberg 2020).⁶ The picture above assumes that “trustworthiness” is a trait among others and can be appraised like many other traits, say, curiosity.⁷ The picture also assumes that an estimation, however vague, is needed when a person's word is taken rationally. But, perhaps both assumptions are wrong. Maybe it is questionable to estimate “trustworthiness”

³ Almost anything can be treated as evidence. See Zagzebski (2012, 129); Owens (2006, 119). Roughly, here the concept of evidence covers anything that can be counted by someone as grounds for belief, *except* moral (and other practical) grounds.

⁴ “Your telling me that P can only said to provide me with knowledge if you know that P” (Ross 1986, 82). Moran (2006, 289) argues that it is not the case that “the speaker's words ‘all by themselves’ should count as a reason for belief, or that the speaker's authority over the constitution of the particular speech act he is performing (e.g. as assertion rather than recitation) shoulders the epistemic burden all by itself.” Moran (2006, 289) explains that “as with any public assumption of responsibility, the appropriate abilities and other background conditions must be assumed to be in place for it to amount to anything. For the speaker to be able to do this it must be assumed by both parties that the speaker does indeed satisfy the right conditions for such an act (e.g. that he possesses the relevant knowledge, trustworthiness, and reliability). These background conditions can themselves be construed as evidential” (Moran 2006, 289).

⁵ Hinchman (2005, 578) writes that trust “is epistemically reasonable when the thing trusted is worthy of the trust – as long as there is no evidence available that it is untrustworthy.”

⁶ For an earlier objection that trust should not be “justified in an evidential way,” see Faulkner (2007, 879). For a view that ‘blind’ trust can be rational, see Baker (1987). Baker (1987, 5) asks, how can “trust be significantly independent of evidence”.

⁷ The starting point here is that ‘trust’ and ‘trustworthiness’ can be used in different senses. The discussion is based on the ordinary language idea that a person is trustworthy (with regard to a certain issue and in a certain context) when one can rely, at least to some degree, on what he says. A person can also be trustworthy in the sense that she is likely to do something that is expected. Her being trustworthy in that sense does not imply, as such, that she is a trustworthy person. For a definition of ‘trust,’ see e.g. Uslaner (2002); Hardin (2006); Jones (2006); Faulkner (2011); Hawley (2014a).

by using evidence? And perhaps there are cases in which it is rational to take another person's word even if one does not vindicate one's belief in a word-giver's trustworthiness by evaluating evidence?

In this paper, I briefly discuss the two objections against the received understanding of everyday conversations, one by one. I argue that both fail. The objections do not show that:

- (1) in ordinary conversations people cannot estimate a speaker's trustworthiness simply by evidence, nor that;
- (2) it can be rational to take another person's word and believe her even in cases where one does not vindicate her view about the speaker's trustworthiness by evidence.

My project here is largely negative. I do not argue for the thesis that people can always estimate other people's trustworthiness, in all meanings of the term 'trustworthy,' merely by assessing evidence. Nor do I argue that it cannot be rational to take another person's word and believe her even in cases where one does not have or rely on any empirically enlightened view about the speaker's trustworthiness. Perhaps it can be rational; the objection I am interested in just does not show it. Before concluding, I briefly discuss the possibility of using moral grounds in belief formation.

Issues such as how to define 'trust' and 'word-taking,' and what the relation between trust and belief in trustworthiness is, are beyond the scope of this paper. The aim here is merely to critically evaluate two objections against the ordinary picture of what happens when a person tells something to another person, who rationally believes what she is told. According to the ordinary picture, we believe what we are told by trusting the speaker, but not blindly, if we are rational.⁸

Estimating Trustworthiness

Both objections discussed below have been recently presented by Jorah Dannenberg (2020).⁹ The objections are not new, but here I concentrate on the new formulations of them. The discussion is not meant to be merely a critical response to a single paper but also (1) a contribution to a debate that has a long history and (2) a general comment on the view that trust and evidence have an uneasy relationship.

It is fair to say at the start that Dannenberg's discussion concerns issues of 'telling' and 'assertions' only indirectly. The main topic of his discussion concerns our ability to believe by word-taking. He argues that "we have no good understanding how both ethical and

⁸ The "assurance view" of testimony is often misdescribed as a position that claims that we can rationally believe someone without evidence that the speaker is trustworthy. As Dannenberg points out, however, those who emphasize the special elements of word-taking do not think that the process is independent of evidence (Dannenberg 2020, 127, fn 8). For a discussion, see Lackey (2011).

⁹ The online version of the paper was published in 2019.

epistemic considerations can be brought to bear when someone makes up her mind to take another at her word” (Dannenberg 2020, 119). This sounds plausible.¹⁰ In what follows, I do not consider this thesis but rather the two objections Dannenberg proposes against the ordinary understanding of everyday conversations. They are not side issues if we want to understand how to describe everyday conversations in which we learn things by trusting others. Dannenberg comments especially on Richard Moran’s views about the nature of ‘telling,’ but many others have defended similar descriptions.¹¹ The view that “the assuming of responsibility” is “present in every genuine assertion” derives from Charles Pierce.¹²

Let us start with the first objection. According to it, the idea of estimating a person’s trustworthiness by using evidence is questionable. Some authors have assumed that “even if the rational significance of someone’s word is non-evidential, the question of her trustworthiness might still turn on evidence about her” (Dannenberg 2020, 127). However, according to Dannenberg (2020, 127), “the idea is problematic.” A conclusion that a speaker is trustworthy should not be made by “considering one’s evidence that she is trustworthy” (Dannenberg 2020, 127). More generally, “seeking out more evidence for another’s trustworthiness is often *self-defeating*,” although our usual ways of talking about trustworthiness “can obscure this” (Dannenberg 2020, 132).¹³ Dannenberg (2020, 132) writes:

Trustworthiness might seem like any other trait, ascribed on the basis of observations about someone’s character—as we might ascribe tenacity or curiosity. That, however, cannot be how the question presents itself from the perspective of the one confronting it. Suppose that you said to someone, ‘Sure, your partner *says* she is faithful. But can you be sure she is trustworthy?’ What sort of reply would it be to say, ‘Yes, because I did extensive interviews with her previous partners, and hired a private investigator just to make sure.’ If it were a straightforward matter of evidential grounds for ascribing a trait, he would have unimpeachable reason for counting trustworthiness among her virtues. Yet his methods of securing those grounds reveal anything but an affirmative answer to the question of her worthiness of trust *for him*.

¹⁰ One can add that we have no good understanding of how both ethical and epistemic considerations can be consistent in situations in which beliefs seem to *wrong* someone. For a discussion, see Basu (2018); Marusic and White (2018). Similar issues arise in the context of epistemic partiality (see e.g. Stroud 2006; Arpaly and Brinkerhoff 2018; Goldberg 2019) and in the debate concerning the thesis that the epistemic status of an opinion can depend on its moral features. About moral encroachment, see e.g. Moss (2018); Basu (2019); Fritz (2020). Obviously, the arguments presented in these debates are highly relevant in the present context as well, but it is not possible to introduce them here.

¹¹ Moran (2006, 273) writes that his paper does not concern mainly “the conditions for knowledge”; he wants “to understand what ‘telling’ is.” Other authors who have defended similar views about the nature of “telling” include Angus Ross (1986) and Edward Hinchman (2005). McMyler (2011, 167) emphasizes that a word-taker should evaluate a speaker’s trustworthiness: “We shouldn’t believe just anything another person tells us, just as we shouldn’t do anything another person commands us. We are always rationally responsible for assessing the competence of the speaker and for determining the relevant extent of her practical and theoretical authority.”

¹² Pierce C. Belief and Judgment. In: Collected Papers V. Cambridge: Harvard, 1934. Cited by Watson 2004, 57.

¹³ Cf. Hawley (2014b). Her starting point is the observation that searching for evidence for trustworthiness is often taken as an indication of mistrust.

The man in the example wants to trust his partner but is unable to do so. Dannenberg (2020, 133) explains that “the pursuit of more evidence of his partner’s good character in order to reassure himself puts, tragically beyond his reach, the kind of security that he actually wants.” In this way “he is led to self-defeat.” The point is not to say that evidence is irrelevant; the point is that the *active pursuit* of evidence would likely be self-defeating. According to Dannenberg (2020, 132), this result (i.e., self-defeat) is not necessary, but seeking out more evidence is “often” self-defeating.

Three points are in order here. They all suggest that the idea of estimating a person’s trustworthiness by considering evidence can indeed be challenging.

First, using and seeking out evidence can be simply counter-productive. When a person has a suspicious mind, like the man in the example, seeking out evidence for trustworthiness makes the possibility of untrustworthiness vivid. To an extent, the situation resembles cases in which a person tries to forget something but actively thinks about it. Active thinking of the issue is not a way to forget it—the process secures that the issue will stay in her mind. Similarly, pondering someone’s trustworthiness easily causes feelings of distrust, at least if a person thinks that he really needs further evidence about trustworthiness. Of course, seeking evidence is a process, and surely there is a chance that he will soon find arguments to assure himself. The process can end happily, and the result need not be counter-productive even if the start may be.

Second, using and pursuing evidence about another person’s trustworthiness may be difficult, because reasons to trust can be *personal*. As Linda Zagzebski (2012, 129) and others have pointed out, *my* reasons to trust a person need not be good reasons for *you* to trust that person.¹⁴ Suppose that your colleague asks you whether the new manager is trustworthy, and you reply that “Well, I trust her.” This answer gives your colleague some reason to trust the manager—after all, *you* trust her—but on the other hand, she has not been provided with a personal reason why *she* should trust her as well. In this respect, considering a person’s “trustworthiness” resembles considering whether someone is friendly. Perhaps we can distinguish friendly people from those who tend to be less friendly, but even friendly people need not be particularly friendly toward all of us. Similarly, trustworthy persons need not be worthy of trust for everyone. This does not mean that estimating trustworthiness (by using evidence) is generally problematic, but it can be complicated.

Third, judging a person’s trustworthiness by considering evidence can lead to a situation in which one treats what one is told merely as evidence. Suppose that business partners are chatting, and one asks the other whether their new customer has already visited the office. The questioner is certain that her partner knows what the right answer is—she checked that the partner was at the office at the relevant time. The questioner also realizes that the partner has a strong reason to tell the truth—she has ensured that the partner has no incentive to mislead her in this matter. In this situation, the questioner believes what she is told, but not because she accepts the invitation to trust and realizes the importance of her partner’s

¹⁴ See also McMyler (2011, ch. 5). Personal relationships and history matter.

assurance. Her careful background work has led her to a state of mind in which she treats what she hears only as evidence: a plausible ground to think that what she just heard is true.¹⁵ In this situation, she takes a risk of making a mistaken conclusion about the visit, but the risk is minor. Furthermore, there is no risk that she would feel *betrayed* if she finds out that her conclusion is wrong. Such risk is absent, as she never accepted her partner's invitation to trust and did not care about the given assurance.¹⁶ We could say that she is not *vulnerable* in the sense people who trust are vulnerable. These kinds of examples suggest that active investigations about other people's trustworthiness can result in situations in which the issue of word-taking is irrelevant. This need not happen, but surely it is possible.

This said, however, it seems unlikely that the idea of estimating a person's trustworthiness by using evidence is somehow generally problematic. At least, Dannenberg's example does not show any problems. The man in the example conducts interviews and hires a private investigator in order to find out whether his partner is faithful. Because of his background work, he replies (when asked) that he trusts his partner when she says that she is faithful. But, the reply is nonsense, as Dannenberg correctly suggests. The man believes what he believes because of evidence about his partner's faithfulness. Her words have nothing to do with his beliefs, and the partner's assurance is not used *even as evidence*. It is not used *at all*, because the man has independent reason to think that the partner is faithful. Trust or a conviction that the partner is trustworthy does not play a role in the man's belief formation process, although he believes what the partner says, namely, that she is faithful.

The problem with the example is that it does not concern the estimation of another person's trustworthiness. The man in the example checks facts (or at least, one fact), but he does not really study at all whether the partner is trustworthy. Suppose that you would like to hire someone for your business enterprise, and you ask a potential employee how old she is. When she tells you she is 35 years old, you check her birth date in her passport and notice that she did not lie and remembers her own age. Do you now know that the jobseeker is trustworthy? Of course not, and it is unlikely that anyone who would like to learn about another person's trustworthiness would use such a silly strategy in the investigation.

If you want to know whether the jobseeker is trustworthy, you should talk with her at length to learn what kind of person she is; you should carefully read any letters of recommendation; you should check her level of knowledge and skills; you should find out how committed she would be to the job; you should use your previous experiences of new employees in your estimation; and so on. The list of how you can rely on evidence in your estimation of another person's trustworthiness is almost endless, but, unfortunately, even careful work does not guarantee that you end up with the right conclusion. Possibly, someday you will be disappointed with the person you hired. There is always a chance that you will painfully learn that she could be more trustworthy (but you may also learn that she is actually more trustworthy than you originally thought).

¹⁵ The questioner treats her partner as though the partner were a camera that can present verbal reports when asked.

¹⁶ Moran (2006, 298) discusses a case in which a person does not *accept* a promise. There is no risk that she would feel aggrieved and let down.

The idea of estimating a person's trustworthiness by evaluating evidence is unproblematic, or at least, the example of a distrustful man does not show that it is problematic. The distrustful man in the example does not estimate his partner's trustworthiness; he is merely interested in whether she is faithful. The ordinary picture of telling seems correct, although the picture assumes that "trustworthiness" is a trait among others and can be estimated like many other traits. Sometimes, the estimation of trustworthiness may be challenging or even self-defeating, but usually it is possible, and it can even be easy.

The fact that we use evidence in the estimation of trustworthiness does not mean that we treat what we hear as evidence. We take another person's word and are optimistic. But the optimism implies that we are vulnerable—a person who invites us to trust her can always betray us. Seeking out evidence for another's trustworthiness does not prevent frustration. Maybe this is only a good thing. By relying on evidence, we avoid gullibility, but we can still trust others, which is often required by morality.

Testimony and Morality

Let us now turn to the second objection. According to it, it can be rational to take another person's word and believe her even in cases where one does not vindicate one's view about the speaker's trustworthiness by assessing evidence. If this claim is correct, then the ordinary picture of telling is not. The ordinary picture assumes that at least some sort of estimation of a person's trustworthiness is needed when her word is rationally taken. The estimation justifies trust and word-taking.

Dannenberg's starting point in the second objection is Judith Baker's example in which a person takes her friend's word, although (1) she has evidence that what her friend says is not true, and (2) she does not vindicate her belief in the word-giver's trustworthiness by assessing evidence.¹⁷ Baker (1987) writes:

Suppose I trust a friend who has been accused of wrongdoing, with an impressive amount of evidence brought against her. Typically, I am faced with a novel situation, where there is no prior set of tests or testing situations that she has come through with flying colours. Suppose she is accused of telling secrets to a foreign government. It is unlikely that I have ever seen her approached by foreign agents, offered vast sums of money or other inducements, indeed, unlikely that I have witnessed any situations offering great temptations. I trust her in such a situation, I do not merely stand by her, acting in ways that support her, either materially or emotionally. I believe she is innocent (3).

Of course, friends have evidence of each other's trustworthiness. Although, "by hypothesis, there is precious little relevant past record," Baker (1987, 4) does not deny that beliefs regarding a friend's trustworthiness are "supported by plain facts – that we come to know

¹⁷ Baker (1987, 3) writes that "what others regard as evidence against her isn't considered by me as evidence at all."

what people are like, that we witness a growth of understanding and knowledge of people when we do things with them, live with them, and that part of the process of becoming friends with someone is finding out who they are, when and how much we can rely on them and trust them.” However, in Baker’s view, beliefs concerning these facts do not really have a major role when a person decides to trust her friend.¹⁸

The person who takes her friend’s word does not come to believe that her friend is innocent, “despite the evidence, by weighing or balancing present evidence against her past record,” and by concluding then that the friend is innocent (Baker 1987, 3). On the contrary, according to Baker (1987, 3), “we think it rational to hold beliefs in the face of counter-evidence.”¹⁹ Although it is not easy to see “what makes the beliefs of the trusting individual rational,” they *are* rational, in cases like the one in the example (Baker 1987, 6).

Dannenberg (2020, 120) tends to agree. Even when there “is considerable evidence that indicates the friend’s guilt” and you are “well aware of the incriminating facts, and your friend has no alternative explanation of them to offer you,” it might be rational to take her word and believe her. Dannenberg’s (2020, 128) interpretation of the example is that the decision is primarily ethical. The person who takes another’s word decides “to set aside doubt in the name of loyalty or friendship.” “In the position of Baker’s protagonist, you might treat loyalty as among your grounds for choosing to take your friend at her word when she proclaims her innocence” (Dannenberg 2020, 121). The warrant of word-taking is *moral*. A person willing to stand by a friend “might be thought to exhibit an admirable kind of heroism, remaining in someone’s corner when others will not believe her” (Dannenberg 2020, 121).

Dannenberg (2020, 121–122) confesses that some of us “might not be moved by the original intuition” about Baker’s example, but he finds it “intuitively compelling.”²⁰ The “image of rationality must somehow allow a conscientious person to knowingly bring ethical considerations directly to bear on the question she confronts” (Dannenberg 2020, 121). This means problems for the ordinary picture of telling. As opposed to the message of the picture, there seem to be cases in which it is rational and appropriate to trust someone and take her word, even if one does *not* vindicate one’s belief in the word-giver’s trustworthiness by evidence (and has evidence that what is said is not true). Dannenberg (2020, 132) argues:

Whenever we take another’s word, we are vulnerable to that person’s causing us to fail in our most basic responsibility as believers. On any plausible account, the insufficiency of the grounds for believing to which you on your own have access puts you at the mercy of the person whose word you take: you let the goodness of her will stand between you and false belief. In

¹⁸ Baker’s argument is difficult to interpret. She says that she defends “the idea of radical form of evidence-independence” (Baker 1987, 3) but, on the other hand, she writes that “beliefs regarding a friend are not independent of observations and experience” (Baker 1987, 4).

¹⁹ According to Baker (1987, 5) confidence in a friend “may well grow as a result of experience, with the growth of the friendship itself. But at each stage of a friendship the confidence one has in one’s friend leaps ahead of what we can think of as the evidence supporting it.”

²⁰ Others who are moved by the example, according to Dannenberg, are Richard Holton and Pamela Hieronymi (2008).

believing her, you thus show confidence in her not to abuse, exploit, or neglect your vulnerable position. Still, it is tempting to think that this confidence needs underwriting. When it does, can it be underwritten by some further evaluation of whether the would-be word-giver is honest and judicious, rather than reckless or mendacious? One problem with thinking in that way [...] is that it cannot vindicate the choice to trust in an example like Baker's.

According to Dannenberg (2020, 130), a person “in the position of Baker’s protagonist will feel pulled in one direction by friendship and loyalty, in another by her take on the evidence and the doubt it seems to support.” Of course, we can imagine that the word-taker finds so much evidence about her friend’s trustworthiness that, taken as a whole, the evidential considerations, after all, support the view that the friend is innocent. But, in Dannenberg’s view, this does not solve the problem. The idea that taking another person’s word can be warranted by evidence about her trustworthiness cannot vindicate the choice in the example, because the choice is made on ethical rather than epistemic grounds. Relying on evidence about trustworthiness could make the choice (epistemically) rational, perhaps, but then it would no longer be primarily an *ethical choice* anymore. According to Dannenberg (2020, 128), if a belief in what another swears to is “ultimately backed up by straightforwardly evidential considerations,” we have moved away from the problem that Baker’s example raises (and do not explain how rational acceptance of beliefs can in some cases be ultimately ethical).²¹

Does Baker’s example show that it is not the case that rational word-taking requires evidential backing, and that it is sometimes rational to believe what does not seem to be true, given the evidence available? If this is so, then the ordinary picture of telling and word-taking should be revised. According to the ordinary picture, rational word-taking implies that the word-taker warrants her belief in a speaker’s trustworthiness through evidence and does not see an overriding reason to doubt what she is told.

For a start, obviously, there are cases of belief acquisition in which ethical considerations seem to override epistemic considerations. A mother who believes that her son has not committed a serious crime, even if she saw aggravating proof a few days prior and understood it, is not a bad person. Her belief is understandable and perhaps we could even expect it. Self-deception can seem ethically admirable, as it can mirror virtuous hopes, values, and emotions. But, of course, such self-deceptive belief is not rational. Our (possible) tendency to give moral credit to mothers who care about their sons so much that they end up with wrong conclusions does not mean that we need to revise our conception of doxastic rationality. It suffices to notice that not all beliefs that may seem ethical are epistemically rational.²² However, these kinds of examples do not concern “telling” and word-taking. Baker’s example does. Let us consider it more closely.

²¹ One may try to vindicate the choice to trust on practical grounds and refer to ethical standards. According to Dannenberg (2020, 127), this leads to the problem of *reflective instability*. A belief that is justified merely on practical grounds does not tolerate critical reflection.

²² Of course, false beliefs can have desirable impacts, including morally desirable impacts. As Robert Merrihew Adams (1984, 3) writes, “there are many cases in which it is rightness rather than rationality that ought to be praised in beliefs.”

Two points are particularly interesting.

First, it is not clear that Baker's case is an example of a situation in which loyalty or friendship plays a crucial ethical role. Instead, it seems that, as far as we are willing to ethically approve the word-taker's decision, much depends on the *content* of what is believed. In Baker's example, a person believes that the friend is *innocent*, which is a very respectful way to see another person.²³

But suppose that the friend says that he is a rapist and a racist murderer. He confesses everything publicly but, to his disappointment, prosecutors and other official bodies do not believe him. They have clear evidence that suggests the person is lying and that the assertion is an ordinary fake confession. However, one person believes him. She remains in her friend's corner when others will not believe him and takes his word that he *is* a rapist and a murderer. She quietly thinks, "this sadist must have done it if he says so." Although she has evidence that this is not so, she treats loyalty as a ground for choosing to take her friend at his word. Her loyalty overrides the importance of evidence.

In this case, should we say that the person's decision to trust is both ethical and rational? Intuitions may differ, but many of us would say, at least, that the person is not as good as Baker's protagonist. The person who believes (against the evidence) that her friend is a murderer is not a moral hero. But the problem is not lack of loyalty. She trusts her friend, come what may. The problem is that she thinks *bad things* about her friend. She should not think so, especially if the evidence points in a different direction. She should not believe her friend; she should seek to help him.

The second point is more important. It is not clear that Baker's case is an example of a situation in which word-taking is not underwritten by evidence concerning a person's trustworthiness (i.e., that she is honest and judicious). By hypothesis, the decision to trust is made on ethical grounds. But it seems that we read the example by assuming that the decision-maker relies on evidential backing when she makes her moral decision. Her trust appears to be at least partly vindicated by evidence. To see this, consider the following case: Someone says in the newspaper that she is wrongly accused of telling secrets to a foreign government and that she is innocent. Almost nobody believes her, as there is considerable evidence that indicates that she is guilty. People are well aware of the incriminating facts, and she has no alternative explanation of them. However, one person believes her.

This person feels loyalty and identifies with her, as she notices (from the newspaper article) that the accused has the same relatively rare profession as she and that they share religious convictions, although the religion in question is not very commonplace. They are also the same age. Because of these commonalities, she feels loyalty exactly as strongly as Baker's main character. Thus, she decides to set aside doubt in the name of loyalty. She believes that the person is innocent; after all, the accused person says so. The fact that she knows hardly anything about the person she trusts does not bother her, as her justification for trust is

²³ If a person believes that the friend is innocent, because believing so is a respectful way to see another person, then she uses practical reason in belief acquisition.

purely ethical. She is willing to trust the accused person “out of a sense of loyalty” (Dannenberg 2020, 128).²⁴

Should we now think that the person’s decision to trust is rational and teach others to form beliefs in that way, if they want to be rational? Again, people may disagree, but many of us would probably say that the decision is not rational. Her feeling of loyalty (or commitment to be loyal) need not be problematic; there are many acceptable grounds to feel so (or to be committed to loyalty). The problem is that the word-taker does not know relevant facts that could help her judge whether the word-giver is trustworthy. As opposed to Baker’s protagonist, who trusts her *friend* and (thinks that she) knows that she is trustworthy, the word-taker in the present case believes almost *blindly*.²⁵ As far as we are ready to say that the word-taker in Baker’s example is rational, she is rational because she does *not* believe blindly but uses her knowledge about her friend’s trustworthiness in belief formation—even if the decision to trust is ethically motivated and seems rational in that respect too.

Baker’s example does not show that it can be rational to take another person’s word and believe the person even in cases where one does not vindicate one’s view about the speaker’s trustworthiness by evidence. The ordinary picture of telling and word-taking—the picture that assumes that at least some sort of estimation of a person’s trustworthiness is required when a person’s word is rationally taken—need not be rejected because of Baker’s example and Dannenberg’s argument. Perhaps it can be rational to take another person’s word and believe the person even in cases where one does not have or rely on any empirically supported view about the speaker’s trustworthiness.²⁶ However, the objection considered above does not show this.

In some places, Dannenberg (2020, 121, 128) formulates his view by saying that, in cases like Baker’s example, the choice to trust *involves* ethical considerations and that loyalty is *among* the grounds that vindicates word-taking. If the point is merely that ethical reasons can *also* be included when a person takes another person’s word rationally, then the point is consistent with the ordinary picture of telling. According to it, evidential backing about a speaker’s trustworthiness is needed; the ordinary picture does not deny the use of other grounds as well. Indeed, other grounds are almost always involved, as not-believing what friends, colleagues, or others tell, without a special reason, would be considered a morally suspicious insult.²⁷ If someone invites you to trust her, by telling you something, it is usually polite to accept the invitation.

Now, the aim of Dannenberg’s (2020, 122) discussion is to illuminate the fact that we lack a good understanding of how ethical (or practical) concerns and epistemic (or theoretical) concerns can interact when a person decides whether to take another person’s word. In

²⁴ If one does not tell anyone what one believes, the belief does not help or comfort others.

²⁵ Of course, the protagonist may know *something* about the accused person if they share a profession etc. In any case, the newspaper example suggests that evidence plays a role in Baker’s original example and helps us conclude that trust may be appropriate.

²⁶ For a discussion, see e.g. Simpson (2017).

²⁷ Moran (2006, 301); Dannenberg (2020, 129). Anscombe (1979, 9) writes that is “is an insult and it may be an injury not to be believed.”

Baker's example, a person trusts a friend who is accused of wrongdoing, with an impressive amount of evidence brought against her. Although she is aware of the indiscriminating facts, she believes that the accused is innocent because the accused says so. She knows what her friend is like and when and how much she can rely on her (Baker 1987, 4). Yet, the decision to trust is primarily ethical. She sets aside doubt in the name of loyalty (Dannenberg 2020, 128).

Suppose, however, against the original description of the example, that the word-taker *uses* the evidence about her friend's trustworthiness in her decision to trust, although the decision is indeed ethically motivated. This should not be problematic, as the evidential considerations and her ethical standards point in the same direction. But the situation is fuzzy. If a person takes another's word and believes that the total evidence supports the decision to trust, we might be tempted to think that she is taking the word *merely* because of evidential considerations although she *describes* the decision as ethical.²⁸ In this light, it seems correct to say that, indeed, we lack a good understanding of how ethical and theoretical concerns interact.²⁹

The Lesson

I have argued that two recent objections against the ordinary picture of telling do not show that the picture is mistaken. The first objection does not show that in daily conversations people cannot estimate a speaker's trustworthiness simply by evaluating evidence. The second objection does not show that it can be rational to take another person's word and believe her even in cases where one does not vindicate one's view about the speaker's trustworthiness by evaluating evidence. I have not argued that people can always estimate the trustworthiness of others, in all meanings of the term 'trustworthy,' by assessing evidence. Nor have I argued that it cannot be rational to take another person's word and believe her even in cases where one does not have or rely on any empirically enlightened view about the speaker's trustworthiness. This can perhaps be rational (although this is unlikely). The relationship between epistemic considerations and ethical considerations in belief acquisition is complicated, and we do not understand everything that it might involve.

²⁸ Dannenberg (2020, 128) says that a person mischaracterizes her reasons if she says that she acts out of a sense of loyalty but justifies her decision to trust with the evidence concerning a word-giver's trustworthiness.

²⁹ An option here is to adopt a version of epistemic permissivism. According to that doctrine, different doxastic attitudes (such as believing and doubting) toward a given proposition may be licensed by the same body of evidence (Rosa 2018). Permissivists reject the *uniqueness thesis*, which says that any set of evidence can justify at most one kind of doxastic attitude toward the view that is licensed by the evidence in question. Permissivism gets support from the observation that rational subjects can disagree with each other although they have access to the same evidence and understand its meaning (Ballantyne 2018). By relying on permissivism, we can try to understand the idea that, in Baker's example, the person who trusts her friend vindicates her *final choice* by ethical considerations, although she uses evidence. Suppose that the overall evidence the person has supports both the belief that the friend is innocent and a doubt about the friend's innocence, and that both conclusions can be licensed with the same evidence. Suppose also that, in this situation, the person decides to trust, as she feels that this is how friends should behave. If this is what happens, then the person's decision to take her friend at her word is clearly ethical, although it is indeed warranted by evidential considerations. Moral considerations can tip the scales in favor of one of two beliefs equally permitted by the evidence (see also Kelly 2013).

The ordinary picture of telling and word-taking assumes that a rational person does not believe what she is told if she has no idea about the trustworthiness of the speaker. However, almost always, we do have some idea, either because we do not have overall evidence suggesting that the speaker is untrustworthy or because we have a reason to think that she is trustworthy. For instance, we know that, usually, strangers who give directions do not lie. In some cases, we can try to estimate a speaker's trustworthiness by considering, say, her tone, identity, or environment.

When a person decides to trust a speaker and takes her word, she may also estimate the speaker from a moral point of view. If she notices that the speaker is a good and benevolent person, she may find her potentially trustworthy. Perhaps she thinks that such persons do not want to lie and try to be careful about what they say. In any case, these value-laden considerations are used as a part of the evidence in the estimation of a speaker's trustworthiness. In this sense, "moral reasons" can clearly be involved in a decision to trust. It is unclear whether a person can decide to take another person's word merely out of a sense of loyalty or friendship. But surely, a person can trust someone partly because she considers the other person loyal and friendly, that is, worthy of trust.

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