Beliefs, Statements and Testimony

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The purpose of this paper is to show that Jennifer Lackey’s “Statement View” (SV) of testimony does not provide as strong a framework for testimony as a source of knowledge as the “Transmission View” (TV) of testimony. First, I will describe her arguments and counterexamples against TV; then I will discuss how they do not convincingly show that TV is false if TV is modified slightly. Second, I will explain SV and show that SV cannot be construed in a non-reductive way; doing so would preclude its ability to yield belief or knowledge through means that are uniquely testimonial. Third, I will entertain a possible objection to the modified TV (henceforth TV*) which states that TV* may be reductionist. Fourth, I will play into the favor of SV* (which is a modified version of SV) and assume that TV* is also reductive, and then show that TV* is still preferable to SV*.

In her essay “Testimony,” Lackey presents several clear explanations of various views in the current and past literature on testimonial knowledge. She argues that SV fails to capture the essential features of testimonial knowledge, while TV does so more successfully. She also discusses the objections to TV and how they can be addressed. In this paper, I will focus on Lackey’s arguments and show how they can be adapted to support her revised view of testimonial knowledge.

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the epistemology of testimony. She first sets aside cases where one would gain knowledge or belief from somebody's testimony without said knowledge or belief being based on testimony. What she focuses on are cases where a hearer “forms a belief on the basis of the content of a speaker's testimony.” She then goes into a discussion about non-reductive and reductive accounts of testimony. She rightfully rejects a view that is exclusively non-reductive, as that would result in a view that sanctions a high degree of gullibility for any agent that follows it. She also rejects both global and local reductionist views. I agree with her arguments against the former, but not the latter. I will go into greater detail concerning her views on reductionism (both global and local) and non-reductionism later, as they are pertinent to my thesis. Lackey then discusses and rejects interpersonal views of testimony (which are not in the scope of this paper), and then begins her arguments against TV, which I will discuss next.

Testimony and Transmission

TV states that testimonial exchange involves a speaker's knowledge being transmitted to a hearer. She then formulates this general thesis by putting it in terms of necessary (TVN) and sufficient (TVS) conditions:

**TVN:** For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that p is warranted (justified, known) on the basis of A's testimony that p only if A's belief that p is warranted (justified, known).

**TVS:** For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, if (1) A's belief that p is warranted (justified, known), (2) B comes to believe that p on the basis of the content of A's testimony that p, and (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that p, then B's belief that p is warranted (justified, known).

After laying out these conditions, Lackey starts to argue against them by using counterexamples. She first attempts to disprove
TVN using two of them. The first involves “speakers who fail to believe, and hence know, a proposition to which they are testifying but nevertheless reliably convey the information in question through their testimony.” Her example, which I will call “creationist teacher,” goes like this:

**Creationist Teacher:** Suppose that a devout creationist who does not believe in the truth of evolutionary theory nonetheless researches the topic extensively and on this basis constructs extremely reliable lecture notes from which she teaches her students (her motivation for this could be the demands of the school’s curriculum).

Because the teacher does not believe the theory of evolution, she does not know it, since knowledge entails belief. Lackey argues that her students still gain knowledge from her reliable testimony, despite the fact that she lacks belief. Thus, TVN is false as there is no knowledge or belief to transfer. Her next example against TVN “involves speakers who have an undefeated defeater for believing a proposition to which they are testifying, but nevertheless reliably convey such a proposition through their testimony without transmitting the defeater in question to their hearers.” Lackey’s example for this is what I will call “unreliable seer,” which goes like this:

**Unreliable Seer:** Suppose that a speaker in fact possesses her normal visual powers, but she is the subject of a neurosurgeon's experiments, and the surgeon falsely tells her that implantations are causing malfunction in her visual cortex. While she is persuaded that her present visual appearances are entirely unreliable, and thereby possesses a doxastic defeater for the corresponding beliefs, she continues to place credence in her visual appearances. On the basis of her visual experience (which is, unbeknownst to her, reliable) she forms the true belief that there is a badger in a nearby field and then later reports this to her friend without communicating the surgeon's testimony to
him (and thus not communicating her defeater). So the content of her experience is reliably conveyed to the hearer, without her doxastic defeater, thereby imparting knowledge or belief she doesn't have herself.¹⁰

This is another instance of a hearer gaining a belief or knowledge from a speaker who had neither, thus showing that TVN is false. I do not believe that these examples are convincing counterexamples to TVN. In “creationist teacher,” for example, Lackey attacks a very narrow conception of TVN. She correctly states that the teacher does not know/believe, but still manages to give knowledge/belief to her students. The issue, according to Lackey, is that the teacher is not the source of this knowledge/belief and thus knowledge/belief is generated. Lackey does not consider the possibility that the teacher could actually be connecting her students to somebody else who knows/believes the theory of evolution (namely the person whose work she studied and based her reliable lecture notes on). If this is considered, then it seems plausible that knowledge/belief was passed to the children through a chain of testimony.¹¹

However, one may object and think that knowledge/belief is lost when it reaches the teacher, as a “gap” in the testimonial chain is created. Even if knowledge/belief is not transmitted, it seems extremely plausible that warrant can be transmitted (which is needed to properly believe the statement that the theory of evolution is true). Just because the teacher did not achieve doxastic justification does not mean she was not propositionally justified. Passing on this propositional justification transmits the warrant necessary for the teacher's students to know/believe based on testimony, despite the fact that the teacher does not know/believe. To illustrate this, take the following example:

**Aunt Ruth:** Suppose that Billy is working on his logic homework while his parents are entertaining some family. It is still the early evening, so the only people who have shown up are his Aunt Ruth (who happens to be a great logician) and her daughter, Jane. Billy is struggling
on a tough proof. The correct proof consists of the set of ordered steps \{\Phi_1...\Phi_n\}, where each \Phi says something like “Theorem X, justified by rule of inference Y,” in such a way that produces a correct proof of \Phi_n. He is stuck on step \Phi_{n-1}, and doesn't know what to do next. His Aunt Ruth, unbeknownst to him, is watching as he attempts to solve the problem. She knows step \Phi_{n-1}, and knows that it is the last step before the conclusion in Billy's proof. She wants to help him, so she tells her daughter Jane \Phi_{n-1}, and then instructs her to inform Billy of it. Jane can remember the exact wording of \Phi_{n-1}, but she does not understand formal logic. Thus, she has no knowledge or belief that \Phi_{n-1}. She goes over to Billy, and then testifies that \Phi_{n-1}. Billy then knows and believes that \Phi_{n-1} is the case based on Jane's testimony, as Jane is generally truthful to the extent of Billy's knowledge. However, the source of the knowledge/belief/warrant is actually his Aunt Ruth.

This example is a demonstration of how knowledge/belief/warrant can be transmitted even when an agent in the testimonial chain does not believe or know the relevant proposition. One may again object that knowledge/belief cannot be transmitted through testimonial chain gaps, but it is far less implausible that warrant is transmitted; for Aunt Ruth and Billy this justification is doxastic and propositional, while for Jane it is merely propositional. Regardless, it is still transmitted. Perhaps an altered TVN can better illustrate this feature of testimony:

TVN*: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B’s belief that p is warranted (justified, known) on the basis of A’s testimony that p only if A’s testimony connects B to someone whose belief is warranted (justified, known).

This allows for Aunt Ruth to be the source of warrant/belief/knowledge in a testimonial chain. It also allows for “direct” person-to-person transmission of warrant/belief/knowledge (for example, if the teacher actually believed and knew the theory of
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Lackey’s “unreliable seer” also fails to be a convincing counterexample to TVN. I agree that one can gain knowledge from the unreliable seer in this case. But I do not believe that said knowledge is based on the unreliable seer’s testimony. This counterexample can be seen in a different light, where the unreliable seer’s friend gains knowledge because of the seer’s reliability, and not her testimony. He is basically using his knowledge of the seer’s reliability in the relevant domain to justify his own belief, which just so happens to be a true one. This is a reductive model, as the seer’s friend is using her as a non-agential mechanism that is highly reliable, where her reliability is known. This allows for true belief, justified using induction. For this counterexample to be effective against TV, the knowledge the seer’s friend receives must be testimonial. Lackey thinks it is, as she writes that the seer “imparts knowledge she does not have.” However, a TV theorist would not think that this example is one where knowledge/belief is transmitted, because the seer has no knowledge/belief to transmit. Basically, the seer is not “impacting” anything, since she has nothing to impart in the first place. It is a product of a reliable process, with strong inductive evidence on the part of the hearer that it is reliable. Calling what the speaker knows in this case testimonial knowledge thus reveals a reductionist understanding of testimony (which is something Lackey wishes to avoid).

Lackey then argues that TVS is false. She does this again by using two counterexamples. The first one I will call “compulsively trusting”.

Compulsively Trusting: Suppose that a hearer is compulsively trusting so that she accepts whatever she is told, regardless of the amount or kind of evidence there is to the contrary. In such a case, the hearer simply is not a properly functioning recipient of testimony...she is so constituted that the knowledge in question cannot be passed to her, even though she possesses no defeaters.
The second case I will call “almost a liar”:20

Almost a Liar: Suppose that a speaker in fact knows that there was a raccoon in the park this morning because she saw one there, but she is such that she would have reported to her hearer that there was such a raccoon even if there hadn't been one. In such a case, the speaker’s belief is an instance of knowledge, and yet because she is an unreliable testifier, the belief that the hearer forms on the basis of her testimony is not an instance of knowledge.”21

Basically, this is a case where a reliable believer may in fact be an unreliable testifier. I think that these examples clearly show that TVS is false. In both cases, all three conditions of TVS are satisfied without the hearer acquiring knowledge, belief, or warrant. However, it has been argued that an “audience condition” could be placed on TVS in order to rule these cases out.22 Such a condition should make accepting a speaker's testimony a rational thing to do, as it is obviously not rational to accept the testimony of the speakers in the counterexamples to TVS. Furthermore, as Paul Faulkner argues, “the idea that testimony functions to transmit knowledge and justification is consistent with placing an audience condition on the acquisition of testimonial knowledge, and so consistent with the falsity of the sufficiency claim as stated.”23 Such a condition would alter TVS as follows:

TVS-RATIONAL: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, if (1) A’s belief that p is warranted (justified, known), (2) B comes to believe that p on the basis of the content of A’s testimony that p, (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that p, and (4) B possesses reasons that make acceptance of p on the basis of the content of A’s testimony that p rational, then B’s belief that p is warranted (justified, known). While initially appealing, I think that this definition runs into a few easy counterexamples due to ambiguity in terms. Many things would make acceptance “rational” while being less than epistemically
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virtuous. For example, suppose that a speaker has a vested practical interest in lying about some state of affairs (like raccoons being in parks), such that the speaker would have testified that $p$ had it actually been the case that not-$p$. This makes it the rational thing to do. In order to separate these practical aims from truth seeking ones, a more specific definition should be given:

**TVS*:** For every speaker, $A$, and hearer, $B$, if (1) $A$’s belief that $p$ is warranted (justified, known), (2) $B$ comes to believe that $p$ on the basis of the content of $A$’s testimony that $p$, (3) $B$ has no undefeated defeaters for believing that $p$, and (4) $B$ possesses positive reasons that indicate that (i) $A$ is a reliable believer and (ii) testifier, then $B$’s belief that $p$ is warranted (justified, known).

Together, TVN* and TVS* amount to a new version of the transmission view, namely TV*. This view is not reductionist, as it does not reduce to other sources of knowledge (induction, perception, etc.). While it may include an “audience clause,” that does not change the fact that TV* is a view about the identity of testimony. Basically, the view states that testimony is the transmission of warrant/belief/knowledge from one agent to another; without this feature, it is not testimony.

**The Statement View**

After she finishes expounding the falsity of TV, Lackey proceeds to outline SV. SV involves no transmission of belief. For Lackey, it is speakers that offer statements to hearers, and it is these statements that bear epistemic properties. The hearer then forms the corresponding belief on the basis of understanding and accepting the statement in question. A hearer can then acquire a belief that is warranted/justified/known from a speaker whose own belief does not have these epistemic properties (such as in UNRELIABLE SEER). This allows for novel knowledge to be generated from testimony. This view also shows why a hearer's belief may fail to be as warranted as a speakers belief (such as in
COMPULSIVELY TRUSTING or ALMOST A LIAR). Lackey puts the primary focus on competence of testimony, which is basically understood in terms of the reliability of the statement. This is her “speaker condition,” which is found in clause (1) of this definition:

$$SV: \text{ For every speaker, } A, \text{ and hearer, } B, \text{ B's belief that } p \text{ is warranted (justified, known) on the basis of } A's \text{ testimony that } p \text{ only if (1) } A's \text{ statement that } p \text{ is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, (2) } B \text{ comes to believe that } p \text{ on the basis of the content of } A's \text{ statement that } p, \text{ and (3) } B \text{ has no undefeated defeaters for believing that } p.$$  

Clauses (2) and (3) are basically meant to make the view “complete.”

This view, Lackey states, is only a minimum of what is necessary for a complete view of the epistemology of testimony. This view comes with serious problems. They are illustrated by the problems discussed earlier in this paper, where Lackey’s counterexamples did not hold water. When we considered “unreliable seer” or “creationist teacher,” we saw that in the latter case knowledge was transmitted. The actual issue in the example lay in the poor formulation of TVN. In the former case, Lackey’s counterexample did not escape reinterpretation. It actually showed that reliability, along with positive reasons, is an inductive source of knowledge (which is how the seer’s friend gained knowledge). It seems that SV can explain the “unreliable seer” case, but perhaps at the cost of being a reductive view of testimony. One may argue that there is no “positive reason” clause in SV, thus precluding it from being truly inductive. But in fact, Lackey herself suggests such a clause. One might reformulate SV to include this clause as follows:

$$SV*: \text{ For every speaker, } A, \text{ and hearer, } B, \text{ B's belief that } p \text{ is warranted (justified, known) on the basis of } A's \text{ testimony that } p \text{ only if (1) } A's \text{ statement that } p \text{ is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive, (2) } B \text{ comes to believe that } p$$
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on the basis of the content of A’s statement that p, (3) B has no undefeated defeaters for believing that p, and (4) B possesses positive reasons that show that A’s statement that p is reliable, then B’s belief that p is warranted (justified, known).

Such a view does not obviously show that testimony is a unique source of warrant, belief, or knowledge. It is true that reliability itself is not reducible. Thus, SV would not have been reductive. However, absent an “audience clause,” SV does not make accepting A’s statement rational. Adding this clause makes the case that a hearer must have reasons to think it is reasonable to accept A’s statement (where reasonable is defined as believing the statement to be reliable). This allows for B’s evidence to link up to reliable testimony in a satisfying way. The issue is that this way does not paint a picture of testimony being a unique source of knowledge, belief, or warrant. It is actually inductive, and thus reductive.

Is TV* Reductive?

One might look at the formulation of TV*, and wonder if it could be construed as a reductive account of testimony. I would argue against this claim, because TV* is not a claim about the creation of warrant, belief, or knowledge. It is merely a claim which states that testimony is unique in that it transmits knowledge/belief/warrant from one person to another. TV* basically identifies testimony with this idea, thus making testimonial knowledge/belief/warrant a unique type of knowledge/belief/warrant. However, due to the nature of clause (4) in TVS*, it seems that any instance of testimony in the style of TV* may in fact be inductive in an internalist sense. After all, hearers must have reasons that indicate certain things about their source of information. This same issue is what seems to place SV* into the category of reductionism. I am willing to accept that TV* is reductive for the sake of argument. Conceding this to SV* will still allow me to prove my final thesis that TV* is a more intelligible framework for an epistemology of testimony than SV*.
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Reductionism, Transmission, and Statements

I will now show that, even if we assume that TV* is reductive, TV* is still a more favorable view than SV*. However, I will first discuss reductionism. In “Testimony,” Lackey rejects global reductionism. This states that “justification of testimony as a source of belief reduces to the justification of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.”31 I agree with Lackey’s arguments against this concept. Her first argument states that in order to have non-testimonial positive reasons to think that testimony as a source is reliable, “one would have to be exposed not only to a wide-ranging sample of reports but also to a wide-ranging sample of the corresponding facts.”32 It is impossible for any one person to gather enough evidence to justify testimony as a source across the board. Lackey also disputes that there is even a fact of the matter regarding the general reliability of testimony. Testimony ranges in complexity. For example, suppose you hear somebody tell you what time it is, and then somebody tell you about the virtues of their favorite sports team. It seems that there is no general way that the idea of testimony picks out a “unified kind.” If testimony is generally reliable it would not make both of these aforementioned reports reliable. The latter would probably be skewed for its own reasons (pertaining to the speaker's bias towards his/her sports team). Thus, it is questionable that it “even makes sense to talk about testimony being a generally reliable source.”33

She then discusses local reductionism, which states that each “instance of testimony reduces to the justification of instances of sense perception, memory, and inductive inference.”34 It seems that both TV* and SV* both fall into this latter category of reductionism (again, I am only accepting that TV* is reductive for the sake of argument). This factor does not disqualify either of these views from being frameworks for testimonial knowledge.35 So what is it that makes TV* a better framework than SV*? Examine again the first clause of SV*: For every speaker, A, and hearer, B, B's belief that p is warranted (justified, known) on the basis of A's testimony that p only if (1) A's statement that p is reliable or otherwise truth-conducive. Herein lies an issue between state-
ments and reliability. It is not clear that a *statement* is the sort of thing that can be reliable. Processes are usually what are described as being reliable or unreliable. In this way, one can describe a person's belief-forming processes or testimony as being assessable for reliability. They are *types* of processes. One takes count of their token “instantiations” (the set of beliefs, or the set of testimonies) and if there is a high enough truth ratio (of truths to falsehoods), the process is considered reliable. One cannot consider a statement to be reliable or unreliable. It is assessable only as being true or false; it is a *token*, not a *type*. Its type would probably be the testifier's set of past testimonies. Thus, SV* collapses into a more obvious form of inductive reasoning. To have belief/warrant under SV*, a hearer need only believe that a speaker reliably believes and testifies. For knowledge, the speaker must actually be a reliable believer and testifier. This sort of reasoning has little to do with the fact that the agent is testifying; it is induction that is doing most (if not all) of the justificatory work. Maintaining that a statement is the sort of thing that can be reliable runs the risk of SV* being unintelligible. TV* does not suffer from this issue, as it imposes no reliability condition on token instantiations of process types. Thus, TV* seems to be a more plausible theory than SV*, whether or not its status as a “reductive theory” is assumed.
Notes

1. Suppose someone sings “I have a soprano voice” in a soprano voice. One learns the content of the proposition by way of perception, and not by way of testimony.

2. Lackey 2011, 73.

3. Non-reductive views of testimony state that testimony is a basic source of justification, on an “epistemic par with sense perception, memory, inference, and the like. Given this, non-reductionists maintain that, so long as there are no relevant undefeated defeaters, hearers can be justified in accepting what they are told merely on the basis of the testimony of speakers.” See Lackey 2011, 73.

4. Reductionists about testimony maintain that, “in addition to the absence of undefeated defeaters, hearers must also possess non-testimonially based positive reasons in order to be justified in accepting the testimony of speakers. These reasons are typically the result of induction.” See Lackey 2011, 74.

5. Ibid., 83.


7. Lackey 2011, 84.

8. Ibid., 84.

9. Ibid., 84.

10. Ibid., 85.

11. Faulkner, 481.

12. Ibid., 482.

13. One may think that the seer’s friend is justified solely by virtue of the seer’s reliability, without positive reasons supporting a belief that the seer is reliable. However, many have objected to reliability being sufficient for doxastic justification. In fact, Lackey herself seems to have this doubt. At the end of her paper, when she lays out the conditions for SV, she states that “further conditions may be needed for a complete view of testimonial knowledge, such as the need for positive reasons embraced by reductionists.” See Lackey 2011, 85.

14. In another paper, Lackey presents a case that is basically the same as “unreliable seer.” It is called “consistent liar;” it is a
case where a radically unreliable believe can still be a reliable testifier. Lackey argues against the objection that the seer/liar can be viewed as non-agential mechanisms (like odometers, thermometers, etc.). She bases her argument on the fact that they are actually agents, and are capable of not testifying about anything at all. In “unreliable seer,” for example, the agent can not testify about the badger, or she can just say something unrelated to the relevant domain of visual experiences. This is true; however it is important to note in these examples, both agents testify to some proposition they do not believe. The only reason the hearers in both cases know/believe is because the speakers are reliable sources of information in the relevant domains. If they were not reliable, could the hearer be justified at all? See Lackey 2006, 84.

15. Ibid., 482.
16. Lackey 2011, 85.
17. In “consistent liar,” Lackey actually stresses the important of strong positive reasons for believing the liar’s testimony. She writes that the hearer in “consistent liar” has “acquired excellent inductive evidence for believing [the liar] to be one of the most trustworthy people to consult on a wide range of topics.” She argues that this high degree of reliability, plus the hearer’s justification in accepting the liar’s report, allow for testimonial knowledge. As I stated before, it is not clear that this is the case; it seems that a reliable process plus positive reasons to believe in its reliability are sufficient for justification. See Lackey, 85.
18. Lackey actually provides a more illustrative counterexample of the same name in her paper “Learning From Words.” However, the one I will describe here from “Testimony” will suffice, as it is basically the same case.
19. Ibid., 85.
20. This example is also retold in greater detail in “Learning From Words.” I will again, however, opt for the version in “Testimony” for brevity’s sake.
21. Ibid., 85.
22. Faulkner, 481.
23. Ibid., 481.
24. By “possesses,” I mean that B believes or knows these reasons.
25. Lackey 2006, 93.
26. Ibid., 96.
27. Ibid., 96.
28. This is important. When one argues against a view solely by counterexample, the counterexamples should not be open to multiple interpretations. See Faulkner, 481.
29. See endnote xiii.
30. Faulkner, 481.
32. Ibid., 76.
33. Ibid., 77.
34. Ibid., 75.
35. Lackey objects to this. She states that “most agents frequently require testimonial knowledge from speakers about whom they know very little.” She argues against local reductionism by using another counterexample I will call “Chicago case.” In this case, a hearer arrives in Chicago for the first time. He receives accurate directions to the Navy Pier from the first passerby he sees. Lackey argues that this sort of transaction results in testimonial knowledge, despite the lack of positive reasons for accepting the passerby’s directions. I do not believe that this is knowledge. Take the following case, which I will call the “Gettierized Chicago Case,” or (GCC). This case is exactly the same as “the Chicago case,” except all of the adult passersby are not exactly sure where the Navy Pier is located (but are confident enough to testify), save the one that the hearer asks directions from. In GCC, as opposed to “Chicago case,” one has the intuition that the hearer’s knowledge is not really knowledge, as he could have easily chosen a non-knower. It is thus epistemic luck. This is the case because of reasons similar to those that explain why a subject has no knowledge in the famous “Barn Case.” For example, “it is a widely accepted thesis that subjects who are unable to discriminate among relevant alternatives in a given
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domain do not possess the knowledge at issue.” (See Lackey, “Knowledge and Credit” 38) In GCC, it is the case that the hearer cannot discriminate among the relevant alternatives. He could have easily asked somebody with no knowledge as to the location of the Navy Pier. One could say, as Lackey does, that this creates a high degree of skepticism. However, the Gettier case is not without its own skeptical issues. If we were to drive through barn country in the actual (non-Gettierized) world, thinking that we are in danger of forming Gettiered true beliefs about barns seems to posit a high degree of skepticism. But why should GCC effect our view of the regular case? It is true that the hearer's environment in “Chicago case” is more epistemically congenial than in Gettiered “Barn Country.” But the reason for this congeniality is that the hearer's world in “Chicago Case” isn't Gettierized. If one tweaked a bad barn case so that none of the barns were fake, one would intuitively grant a person in that world knowledge (much like in “Chicago case”). The reason the Gettier “Barn Case” is troubling is because of its modal proximity to the actual world. For this same reason, GCC is troubling for “Chicago case,” because it is a reasonably close possible world. It may even be closer than the bad barn world. See Lackey 2011, 77.

36. However, the reliability of a particular statement might be viewed as a brute fact about the statement itself. That is, its reliability does not have to be evaluated in a frequentist sense. This is not impossible. However, if this were the case, the reliability of the statement can have no effect on the justification or the knowledge that p for the speaker. It may increase the speaker's warrant propositionally, but not doxastically, as the hearer would not know anything about the statement's reliability. This renders clause (4) of SV* problematic, as there is no way to possess the kind of positive reasons for the reliability of a statement in a non-frequentist sense. Thus, SV* would be non-reductionist and therefore false (by Lackey's lights).

