I am going to deal with some of the ways in which various forms of telling things to others come under moral or epistemic suspicion. Since I'm considering this against the background of what is (according to me) our very deep reliance upon testimony and the associated trust in others that accompanies it, then I am thinking of these ways as pathologies, in that they present as distortions of or diseases of the normal case of telling and relying on what is told. But, as we shall see, they have very different morphologies and there is a real question about how much of a distortion they might be. In particular, there is a question whether they deserve (all of) the moral and epistemic odium or suspicion that is their usual lot.

The phenomena I shall discuss are gossip, rumour, and urban myth. Another obvious candidate is lying but I shall not treat of it here. Lying is an interesting phenomenon with many different facets of philosophical interest, but since it arises from the deliberate intention to deceive an audience by saying what the speaker believes to be false it is too obvious a pathology of testimony to be treated in a paper concerned with more ambiguous candidates for that title. A more interesting candidate in the present context is the phenomenon of "spin" but reasons of space will prevent my treating of that; it must await another occasion. Gossip, rumour, and urban myth are different in many ways, most notably perhaps in their relation to the truth and the position of the speaker with regard to truth. As already noted, lies are distinguished at least by the intention to say what is believed by the speaker to be false. By contrast, it is plausible to think that gossip is standardly sincere, and may be true and known to be true. Rumour may be true and believed to be true but the justificatory base for speaking it is weak, and urban myth is more legend than rumour—it is more frozen and immune to refutation, but it can function in a similar way to more ephemeral rumours. Initially, I shall treat these phenomena as though they involved mere transmission of propositions, but of course this is a considerable simplification and even abstraction from the reality. Gossip, rumour, and especially urban myth are highly narrative in form; they are presented in a dramatic mode, sometimes even in song or poem, and they often contain, explicitly or implicitly, strong interpretive and evaluative elements. Here, as elsewhere, the picture of transmission as the passing on of a lump of information in a single line of transference
from individual to individual is misleading. Nonetheless, the misleading picture reflects something right, namely, the fact that testimony begins with some form of witnessing. This need not be a perceptual encounter though that is a primary case of witnessing. It can also consist in a proof or an expert judgement, as I have previously argued (Coady 1992: 48, 51–62). Here I mention the point only to deal with one claim about gossip that seems wrong. It is made by Laurence Thomas who gives the following example as a clear case of gossip:

Austin: I can’t believe that they are awarding her the Nobel prize in physics. Must be because she is a woman.

Lee: To tell you the truth I have been thinking the same thing myself.

(Thomas 1994: 47)

Thomas thinks this is “surely gossip” (Thomas 1994: 48), but I think it is better described as malicious speculation. I suspect Thomas treats this exchange as obvious gossip because he thinks that gossip, as in the example, must express negative feelings about the subject of the gossip. As we shall see, this negativity need not be a feature of gossip, but, in any case, I am interested in gossip as a possibly degenerate form of testimony, and the exchange between Austin and Lee makes no pretence of being a testimony transaction. Austin’s “message” is a speculation; he has witnessed nothing relevant in even the most extended sense of “witnessing”. These are points to return to.

Thomas might reply that he doesn’t think of gossip as a form of testimony, even a degenerate form. It is true that there are usages of “gossip” that are wider, and perhaps looser, than the use I am interested in, uses in which any casual exchange or conversation about anything whatever may count as gossip. Sometimes people think this way when they talk of a “gossip session” or “shooting the breeze”. Just chatting about one’s own exploits or commenting, speculating, and guessing about aspects of the known exploits of others could then be gossip, but in the sense of the term that interests me you cannot gossip about yourself and conveying guesswork and so on doesn’t count as gossip. There is then a degree of stipulation about my approach, but any initial characterization of the topic will involve some stipulation and will express particular theoretical interests. I claim on behalf of my account that it captures a great deal of what people normally mean by gossip (and of rumour and urban myth) and illuminates significant moral and epistemological scenery.

Let us begin with gossip. There is quite an extensive literature on gossip, some of it philosophical, but a lot of it sociological. There are disputes about how to define the topic, as we have already seen, so I will not offer a tight definition, but rather give some necessary marks of the concept of gossip as I understand it. I shall take it that gossip has the following features: it is usually conveyed by those who believe it to be true, it can be the transmission of perfectly justified beliefs, it need not be malicious though it sometimes is. Its subject matter is invariably personal, though of course it can be about persons who represent or are thought
to typify groups. It is also transgressive, in at least the sense that the transmission of the information can be presumed to be unwelcome to the subject of it. Some theorists claim that gossip is distinguished by the triviality of its subject matter. It is, they say, essentially "idle talk". It is understandable that this should be said, but it remains contentious. After all, gossip about someone's job prospects or manoeuvrings, about their adulterous conduct, about a political leader's financial dealings are all matters that may have momentous consequences for the individual concerned and for others affected by his or her actions. Acknowledging this, Rosnow has amended the claim to make it more plausible by concentrating on the style of communication rather than its content. It is the setting and context of the conversation that must have at least the appearance of the casual. As he puts it, the exchange should be "characterized by a kind of belle indifference". The talk should be "packaged" to appear as idle (Rosnow 2001: 210). This is indeed more plausible and seems to capture something typical of gossip. It is reflected in the casual, bantering tone adopted by many newspaper gossip columnists. One philosopher agrees that an idle tone is characteristic of gossip but takes this to be a moral defect of it. She says, "It is characteristic then of gossip to fail to give matters their due regard; gossip often involves a mismatch between the tone and substance of the discussion. Such a mismatch may simply reveal superficiality or it may constitute a failure of empathy and moral understanding" (Holland 1996: 203). I shall deal with this criticism later, but it is worth noting at this point that much of the literature on gossip is concerned with its moral status. Most of the criticism of gossip is moral rather than epistemic. This suggests that gossip exhibits no essential epistemic difference from ordinary testimony; there is no reason why gossip should be less reliable than ordinary testimony. In what follows, I shall try to assess the moral objections to gossip, but also raise some points about its possible epistemological deficiencies. There is one more mark of gossip that needs to be mentioned, namely, that there is something essentially restricted or intimate about at least the initial range of gossip. This point is hard to make clearly, but the basic idea is that the natural home in which gossip begins is that of a small group, though, of course, the information may spread from small group to small group until the news becomes widespread. Someone is not gossiping who shouts the information from the rooftops for all and sundry to hear.

The debate about the moral status of gossip (sometimes cast as a debate about its positive or negative social impacts) is basically between those who think that gossip violates some significant moral constraint, such as respect for persons, and those who think that gossip has an important social role. These latter sometimes ignore the supposed violation, but sometimes acknowledge it and think that it is outweighed by the good effects.2

First, the moral objections to gossip. Some of these proceed as though gossip must always be malicious. If this were true, then there would indeed be a black mark against it from the beginning. But it is clearly not true, at least if the malice in question is seen as stemming from a motivation to do harm. Many gossips
have no interest in maligning the object of their talk, they are just interested in the buzz of the topic and the status their communication gives them. Indeed, gossip need not retail anything disreputable about its object. I may gossip about something you are doing that is either neutral or positive with respect to your reputation, as when I retail some confidential facts about your soon to be successful house sale or the secret that you are about to be elevated to the peerage. What seems true is that there must be something unwelcome to the gossipee about the revelation you are conveying. The subject of the gossip must at least be presumed not to want the information in question conveyed either generally or to that particular audience.

I shall proceed as if this unwelcome aspect is essential to gossip, though there are in fact several counter-examples to an unqualified version of this claim. Some very trivial newspaper “gossip”, about, for example, a society wedding may totally lack the unwelcome aspect, but for this very reason we may not want to treat it as gossip, or not as paradigmatic gossip. It is more like advertising or public relations offered under the pretence of news. More interestingly, there is a range of cases where the subject of the gossip may positively welcome the spreading of the information, and may indeed be the source of it, yet the information be both significant and somehow transgressive. Consider the case of academic gossip about who is to be offered a new position. If we think of the successful candidate as either the source, or at least the cheerful subject, then the unwelcome thesis seems imperilled.4 There are two possible responses here. One is to shift focus on the subject of the gossip so that the gossip is about the actions of the appointments committee, and only secondarily about the status of the successful candidate. Members of the committee will find the gossip unwelcome—either in reality or by the conventions of confidentiality to which they are obliged to adhere. Another alternative is to say that the candidate may actually welcome the spreading of the news, but must take the stance of finding the transmission unwelcome. To adopt a useful test for gossip, we should ask: would the conversation stop or suffer embarrassment if the candidate suddenly entered the room? If the answer in the present case is, “Yes” then there seems a sense in which the candidate must be viewed as finding the transmission unwelcome whatever he privately thinks.

It is this unwelcome feature of gossip that provides one significant purchase for the moral critic. Granted that gossip need not be retailed with the aim of damaging the subject of it, might it nonetheless count against any proposed good in gossip that it must run counter to the subject’s desire that the information remain confidential or at least restricted? One philosopher has argued that, because of this, gossip violates the Kantian injunction to treat others as ends in themselves and not merely as means. Prima facie, there is some plausibility in this. The gossiper need have no regard for the good of the person whose fortunes they report, the facts about them are recounted (at best) merely for the pleasure it gives the speaker and the audience, and possibly for the regard the gossiper achieves by reason of his/her knowledgability. Does this violate the Kantian injunction? This
is one of the points at which the injunction is hard to interpret. Am I treating someone only as a means if I drive tourists by their handsome house to show them a fine example of the sort of Victorian architecture typical of the area? And suppose I know that they don’t want their house to be the object of tourist gazing? What this suggests is that the test of “failing to treat someone as an end” cannot rule out all cases of acting against their wishes, even where these wishes are concerned with their privacy. But, perhaps we can only allow such disregarding where the disregard is aimed at achieving some good, and the fact is that gossip has no such purpose.

There are two problems with this. The first is that gossip arguably does have such a purpose, or purposes, and the second is that, even if it doesn’t, the subject’s desire for privacy, confidentiality, or secrecy may be unreasonable. The social psychologists that give a positive account of gossip often stress that it has a role in solidifying social norms. The idea seems to be that gossip about the behaviour of others takes place in an explicit or implicit context of norms and the evaluation commonly invoked (Oooh, she didn’t! Gosh, fancy that! . . .) has the effect of reinforcing those norms. As Rosnow puts it: “the consequences of rumour and gossip also reflect the extent to which social norms can be enforced on individuals who ostensibly threaten or violate them. In small groups, for example, gossip may be a way of shepherding the herd by saying ‘These are the boundaries, and you’re crossing them’” (Rosnow 2001: 224). Rosnow here seems to be running two different things together. On the one hand, the effect of reinforcing the norms for the group involved in the retailing and hearing of the gossip, and on the other, the enforcing of the norms on the person gossiped about. The latter will not be the direct effect of the gossip since that person, in the first instance, at any rate, doesn’t hear it. The former may well take place and lead to the latter.

The reinforcement thesis raises two further puzzles. The first concerns the generally favourable attitude of social scientists to this reinforcement (of either kind), and the second concerns the empirical claim itself that the attitude rests upon. On the first, it is strange (as Holland has pointed out) that the cementing of existing norms is simply taken for granted as a positive outcome. Perhaps this reflects the persistence of the simple-minded cultural relativisms that have been so influential, and so damaging in the history of anthropology and related studies. Whatever the explanation, it is obvious that existing social norms may be either good, bad, or indifferent from a moral perspective. The reinforcement provided by gossip may be to solidify widespread immoral prejudices against blacks, women, homosexuals, foreigners, immigrants, or whatever, and where this is so, it constitutes an objection to the role of gossip not an endorsement of it. As to the second, the role of gossip may just as easily be the breaking down of social norms as the protection of them. In societies with rigid public codes, gossip may serve to show the hypocrisy of those who proclaim and enforce them, thus leading to the destruction of respect for those elites and even of the codes themselves. So, gossip about the sexual behaviour of various influential leadership
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groups may lead to the erosion of strong sexual censorship regimes, and gossip about the perks and lifestyle of Communist leaders may have played a part in undermining public confidence in the professed values of fraternity and equality. It is also possible that both reinforcement and subversion can occur together (though directed towards different prevailing norms). Pre-Revolutionary France provides a case in point. In a society in which formal news outlets were stereotyped and tightly controlled by those in power, the primary source of information about the King and the ruling elites came from gossip and rumour. As Robert Darnton has argued in his fascinating book, *George Washington’s False Teeth*, gossip and rumour about the French Court not only provided a rare source of personal and political information but thereby possibly played a part in preparing the ground for the Revolution (Darnton 2003: ch. 2). It did this by exposing the hypocrisy of the Court and the unworthiness of the King and his dependence on the intrigues of others. Some of the underground transmission was classical gossip retailed at selected sites such as the Tree of Cracow in the grounds of the Palais-Royal. Other was more rumour, though sometimes beginning as gossip, and other again was song and coded poetry circulated by paper notes or memorized word of mouth. Again, as with the reinforcement story, the question of whether the undermining is good or bad requires independent adjudication. More broadly, the question whether gossip has good or bad outcomes cannot be given a global answer. It all depends on the context and the actual outcomes. We cannot, however, rule out in advance the possibility that the outcomes will be good.

Another good outcome claimed on behalf of gossip is the way gossip can improve individuals’ self-regard. By a process of what some have called “downward comparison” we may come to think better of ourselves by comparing our behaviour or character to that revealed of some other person by gossip (Suls and Goodkin 1994: 173; Ben-Ze’ev 1994: 19). The revelation that some famous person, for instance, has feet of clay may reassure us about the normalcy of our own feet. Again, the two questions posed earlier arise regarding this claim. First, it is not clear that bad information about others is a particularly sensible or healthy way of achieving a sound understanding of one’s own worth. Self-congratulation can result in self-delusion. Second, the deflating information about the worth of others may equally well give rise to the sense that one should lower one’s own standards rather than take pride in maintaining them. Either way of course there may be some solidifying effect of the gossip exchange; the deluded may be mutually bound by their delusions and a group may find some agreeable cohesion in mutually endorsed lowering of expectations of self and other. One possible connection of gossip with norms is that whereby the conveyors of gossip may be led to reassess their moral views by finding that their audience is not as shocked by the gossip as the speakers had expected. Gossip may therefore assist in what could be a useful form of self-criticism.⁵
A further potentially positive feature of gossip that is perhaps too obvious to be remarked upon by social psychologists is the fact that many people find the telling and receiving of gossip enjoyable. Most people are curious to know the truth not only about the physical world or mathematics but also about the deeds and misdeeds of other people. Sometimes this curiosity has a functional point in orienting us towards the people with whom we are going to interact: this is the idea that social psychologists are getting at with their somewhat simplified talk of norm reinforcement and the like. But sometimes the satisfaction of the curiosity is simply fascinating in itself, even if it can also be useful. We are interactive social beings who spend a great deal of our lives in conversation, much of it about other people. News about their journey through life with its pitfalls and triumphs is intrinsically interesting to most people, and it is often even more interesting when we know or believe that we are not going to hear it from them.

I have claimed that gossip is pleasurable for many of us, but there are those who find gossip of any sort uninteresting, even distasteful. They inject a chill of disapproval into the gossip room and often produce a cessation of the activity until they depart. Thereafter, the gossip resumes and often expands to include them as subjects! It would be interesting to explore this difference in attitude and some of its nuances, such as those who are happy to hear gossip but not to retail it, but I shall not pursue this matter here. Of course, it is necessary to stress that when I refer to the pleasure of gossip as good, I do not mean that it is an unqualified good. Pleasure is at best only one good among others; it can be outweighed by other goods or harms, and some pleasures may be inherently illicit, as are those (to take an extreme case) of paedophilia.

This leads us to the claim that there is something intrinsically bad about gossip that may preclude consideration of the good outcomes (if any) or at least may need to be weighed against them. Here, we should consider two of the issues raised earlier. First, there is Holland's claim that "It is characteristic then of gossip to fail to give matters their due regard; gossip often involves a mismatch between the tone and substance of the discussion. Such a mismatch may simply reveal superficiality or it may constitute a failure of empathy and moral understanding." Gabrielle Taylor makes a similar claim, though less forcefully. "Gossipers", she says, "trivialize experience by ignoring the impact with which the author of the experience will in some way have to cope. Thus they distort and belittle that person's experience" (Taylor 1994: 46). On the face of it, both claims seem excessively high-minded. Gossip is not always concerned with matters of moment, and, even where it is, the requirement that tone should match subject matter smacks of puritanism. The idea that serious subjects should only be addressed in a solemn tone of voice presents an affront to the complexity of human communicative intercourse, especially to the dimensions of humour, irony, satire, and playfulness that are rightly characteristic of much of it. Of course, tone may reprehensively mismatch content, as with some sneering discourse, and this may well exhibit...
superficiality or moral failure of some sort. My only point is that, contrary to Holland, the tone characteristic of much gossip need not display moral fault, nor need it trivialize what should not be so treated.

Second, there is the issue, already briefly discussed, that gossip is standardly unwelcome to the gossipee. It is natural to think that this shows it to be in violation of respect for persons, and hence immoral. As mentioned above this depends to some degree on why the conveying of the information is unwelcome. There is no absolute right that information about oneself be withheld from others. Respect for privacy cannot reach that far. Perhaps my not wanting facts about myself to be made known to others creates some presumption against doing so, but it may be rebuttable in a variety of circumstances. Nor need these circumstances require some very great good to rebut the presumption. To give a personal example. I was once in a group of philosophers who were criticizing another more famous philosopher in ways that seemed to me to impugn his character as well as his philosophical standing. I had discovered from his publisher that the author under attack had actually assigned all his royalties from a very successful book to charity and proposed to do so again for the second edition. When I mentioned to the author my knowledge of this fact and my respect for his decision, he asked me not to tell anyone about his altruism. But in the company of his somewhat carping critics, I thought it right to do so and did. I think I was justified in acting in this way, and, if so, the example shows that the gossipee's desire to keep the matter secret need not be determinative of the moral status of the gossip. It also shows that Bertrand Russell was wrong to claim that "no one gossips about other people's secret virtues" (Russell 1994: 50). It further suggests that it does not require the prospect of some overwhelming good to validate the gossip transaction, since the author in question is fairly unconcerned with what people think of him.

Another interesting phenomenon is that of what might be called remedial gossip. By this I mean that phenomenon where B gossips about A to C, D, and E and then E tells A that B has been telling them about A. We might be reluctant to call E's transmission "gossip" because it is aimed at alerting A to the gossip about him or her. But it may well be offered in the characteristic tone of gossip and E may be well aware that B, C, and D would be unhappy to have the matter relayed back to A. Nor need E's motives be particularly noble.

I said that gossip is usually conveyed by those who believe it to be true and who may well be justified in their belief. This feature makes it seem that gossip is not, from the point of view of epistemology, a "pathology" of testimony at all. This idea is worth closer examination. One problem with it is that some of the motives typical of gossip may be fragile with respect to truth-transmission. The desire to titivate, or to show one's "insider" status as someone with access to otherwise unavailable information is not the sober background we expect of solid testimony. Bertrand Russell is thinking in this way in the section from which the earlier quotation was taken. He says, "The widespread interest in gossip is
inspired, not by a love of knowledge but by malice: no one gossips about other people’s secret virtues, but only about their secret vices. Accordingly most gossip is untrue, but care is taken not to verify it. Our neighbour’s sins, like the consolations of religion, are so agreeable that we do not stop to scrutinise the evidence closely. Curiosity properly so-called, on the other hand, is inspired by a genuine love of knowledge.”

I have argued that gossip is not necessarily malicious. If it were, then the epistemic objection would carry some weight since an informant who is inspired by malice will be seeking to put another’s behaviour in a bad light and this may well bias their testimony. But even gossip that conveys negative information about a person need not be inspired by emphatic malice; it may be mere excitement at discovering the faults or follies of another and an interest in being the one to know and convey such stuff. Curiosity can be as lofty a disposition as Russell claims, but it need not be. It can be more earthy without becoming positively malicious and it may still retain an orientation to knowledge. Leaving aside malice, a disdain for other common motives for gossip faces two problems. One is that various forms of legitimate testimony, even of formal testimony in courts, may be subject to similar motivations. Witnesses conveying information that has no taint of violation may nonetheless be moved by the desire to cut afigure in great events and may delight in the excitement their news will create. They may also be moved by a concern to get things right—any account of what inspires reliable testimony must allow for the existence of mixed motives. Second, even if the motivations associated with gossip are not of the loftiest, they need not be destructive of a concern for the truth. The desire to impress may indeed make one more scrupulous in conveying accurate information since one’s status as a reliable informant may be crucial to the positive appreciation one seeks.

Another epistemic objection to gossip is that it excludes by its very nature an important source of epistemic reliability, namely, confirmation, falsification, or correction by the subject of the gossip. If we accept that absence of the subject is a necessary concomitant of gossip then it is indeed true that the gossip situation deprives the gossippers of an additional direct checking resource for the information. But I doubt that this is as drastic an epistemic flaw as it initially seems. In the first place, where the information originates from the subject, and our informant is known to be close to the subject and a generally reliable witness who has no particular stake in lying, it may simply be redundant, verging on the neurotic, to insist on checking with the subject. (Consider the parallel with those in the grip of mild obsessive-compulsion who need to return home to check by perception their firm memory that they have turned off the iron or locked the back door.) There are always further checks one can do on testimonial information, just as there are with observational or remembered information, but it is epistemically redundant to do so in many cases. In the second place, there will usually be little reason to believe that the subject of the gossip can be relied upon to provide valuable confirmation or disconfirmation. After all, since the subject does not want
the information spread at all, he or she is most likely to deny it or refuse confirmation, whether the facts are as reported or not. In the third place, where the gossip does not originate from the subject, it may well be that the subject is in no position to confirm or deny the information. There is an interesting range of cases here. Consider the case where information is that you are to be awarded some honour and the source is an “insider” in the conferring process. You may know nothing of the fact at the relevant stage, or you may know only that there is some prospect of the honour. So your exclusion from the gossip circle creates no epistemic problem for the reliability of the information.

This example is also interesting as a problem for the unwanted criterion of gossip since it is presumably the people in the honouring process (or most of them) who don’t want the information spread, even though it is information about you. Nonetheless, you are likely to want to know about it before the gossiper and audience get to hear about it. If, however, you are so unusual as not to care about that, then you would not be discomforted at being present during the gossip session. This, I take it, counts strongly against the transmission being gossip, at least about you—it may count as gossip about the honour process and honour bestowers.

I conclude that this epistemic objection to gossip fails as a general objection, though there may indeed be occasions on which closing off access to the subject’s own testimony has epistemological disadvantages. More generally, gossip as I have defined it is not a pathological form of testimony but a normal form of it. Whatever its moral standing, and I have argued that this may be less dismal than usually thought, its intellectual status is reasonably respectable. In epistemic terms it may be likened to whispered information rather than openly spoken word of mouth.

RUMOUR

Gossip and rumour are often run together in social science treatments, but they are basically different in kind though there are some areas of overlap. At any rate, I shall treat them as differing in the way suggested at the outset, namely with respect to the justificatory base of the information conveyed. Gossip may be true and known or justifiably believed to be so, rumour has by (my) definition no strong justificatory base. The typical way to introduce a rumour is to say, “Have you heard . . . ?” whereas the typical introductory mode of delivering gossip is, “Did you know . . . ?” The gossiper may, of course, convey false information and be mistaken about the strength of the justification he has for the information. But he must present himself as being in an authoritative position with respect to the information. Must he always believe that he is telling the truth and in an epistemic position to do so? Can’t there be deliberately deceitful gossip? Sissela Bok thinks so, indeed she lists “gossip that is known to be false”, as one of the
three main categories of gossip (Bok 1983: 98). But she, like many others, makes no real effort to distinguish gossip from rumour. To my ear, the phrase “lying gossip” does not ring true; the more accurate description of the activity is just “spreading lies”. In any case, it is untypical of gossip. Rumour-mongers, by contrast, may well deliberately create false rumours. In wartime, the spreading of false rumours can be a crucial political weapon, as can be the combating of damaging rumours. Moreover, rumours may well begin in sheer speculation, though they will usually mimic testimonial transmission by conveying the idea that someone somewhere is a witnessing source.

A further difference is that rumour is not restricted by topic to the personal. It may be about institutional, political, religious, or physical events. You can spread a rumour about an earthquake but you cannot gossip about it. A further difference is that gossip is normally quite restricted in its circulation. A small group may get together to gossip about a colleague or a boss or whomever, but have no desire to spread the information further. (Gossip columns in newspapers are an exception to this, though even here there lingers some element of the closed group point, inasmuch as the readers of the column are meant to have a sense of being inducted into a privileged, if rather large, group.) Rumour, however, seems essentially prone to run abroad, “to spread like wildfire”. Of course, one area of overlap is that something that begins as gossip may well continue as rumour. This is probably one of the reasons for the widespread failure to distinguish between the two.

Given rumour’s indifference to a secure basis for its reports, can anything positive be said on its behalf? Even raising this question may seem perverse, in the face of the bad reputation so widely enjoyed by rumour. But it should be remarked that the enemies of rumour sometimes have an agenda that is not itself entirely respectable. I mentioned earlier the attempt to control and counteract rumours during wartime. The American psychologist Gordon Allport, for instance, was one of those who set up rumour clinics to help curb the spread of rumours in Massachusetts during World War II. He was later the co-author of an influential study of rumour (Allport and Postman 1965). Allport was helped in the anti-rumour campaign by his doctoral student Robert H. Knapp who defined rumour as “a proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification” (Knapp 1944: 22). This definition would count every newspaper exposé of government misdeeds or secrets that met with official silence or denial as rumour even if they were true and thoroughly justified. This makes nonsense of our ordinary understanding of rumour and reflects an ideal of official control of information that is, to put it mildly, undemocratic. It is not surprising that it might arise in a climate of war, but those of us who believe that war is frequently unjustified can hardly take consolation from this. Where governments are bent upon the suppression of information, for whatever reason, then “propositions for belief” unendorsed by the authorities will assume greater significance.
One thing that might be noted as an epistemic merit is the power of rumour in providing hypotheses for further exploration. By itself a rumour may be poor epistemic coin, but investigating it may lead to expanding one’s knowledge in direct and indirect ways. The direct route is that of confirmation or falsification of the rumour’s contents. The indirect route may be the discovery of interesting information that explains the rumour’s genesis, or it may be the discovery of a genuine truth that the rumour misleadingly presents. So we may discover that a rumour to the effect that a rogue politician is selling nuclear secrets to North Korea against his own government’s policies and desires is false, but also discover the related truth that a respected senior scientist is selling the secrets with his own government’s connivance. Dismissal of reports because they are “mere” rumours can sometimes block opportunities for discovering important truths. One of the most striking instances of this was the rumour emanating from Tokyo in 1941 concerning an impending attack on Pearl Harbor. The US Ambassador Grew reported in January 1941 from Tokyo a rumour that the Japanese Navy was planning a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. It was attributed to the Peruvian Embassy which was regarded by the ambassador and others as “a not very reliable” source. The rumour was dismissed by one and all, including the Ambassador, as fantastic. As it turned out, the date the rumour began coincided with the inception of the Yamamoto plan for bombing Pearl Harbor (Shibutani 1966: 73-4).

In light of these positive aspects to rumour, it might be claimed that those who spread a rumour are not so dastardly as they are usually thought to be. Indeed, with all its faults, the poor coinage of rumour may often be the only information currency available. Some social scientists exploring rumour argue that it commonly arises in response to alarming situations where reliable information is cut off, either deliberately by censorship or repression, or accidentally by confusion or disaster. In such situations, rumour tends to be a focus of high social interaction. The “news” conveyed is not simply passed on from one voice to another, like the passage of a “brick” of information. The item is often speculated upon, criticized, amplified, compared with other related items of rumour, and with what pieces of hard news or testimony are available. In addition the originator of the rumour, if indeed there is only one such source, need not have had anything like observational access to the supposed fact that is spread. He or she may have produced the information as a speculation in the absence of any reliable testimony or observation. Even so, the rumour mill will usually present the rumoured facts as something that is somehow sourced in someone’s observations, though it will usually be vague about who that is. Shibutani’s discussion of the World War II rumours about the reduction in training and furlough time for US troops in Georgia in late 1944 exhibits this sort of pattern. The rumours were fuelled by the hard news of the increased German counter-offensive in Europe and the absence of any real information about the effect this might have on these newly inducted troops (Shibutani 1966: 9–14).
Psychological investigations of rumour tend to divide between those with an individualistic and rather static picture of transmission and social psychologists, like Shibutani, who see the picture in more dynamic and social functionalist terms. The former tend to be hostile to rumour and the latter more sympathetic. The former proceed by setting up highly artificial experimental scenarios in which a piece of information is to be passed on to specified others (often the experimenter) and changes in the literal form of the message are noted for inaccuracy. This way of proceeding is open to a number of objections, some of which I have raised elsewhere (Coady 1992). The artificiality of the experimental situations rules out many of the standard ways of confirming, sifting, and interpreting the original informational setting; the emphasis on the literal preservation of a sentence or set of sentences is an unnecessary restriction on the conveying of information; the message in question often has little significance for the witness, and so on. By contrast, the social psychologists emphasize the fluidity of real life situations, the need for information in information-starved settings, the relation of rumour to practical thinking and decision-making rather than speculative reason and abstract truth. Indeed, they are inclined to minimize the issue of truth. So Shibutani says: "rumor is not so much the dissemination of a designated message as the process of forming a definition of a situation" (Shibutani 1966: 9). The cultural historian Hans-Joachim Neubauer describes it as "a mirror in which society catches sight of its hidden self" (Neubauer 1999: 174). These emphases are no doubt important for the empirical study of rumour, but it should be recognized that the dissemination of a designated message is perfectly compatible with forming a definition of a situation or mirroring social psychology. The interest in realistic social settings should not be seen as excluding the concern for the relation of rumour to truth or to epistemic justification.

So is rumour pathological testimony? It seems that it is a form of testimony because it involves the transmission of propositions from one or more persons to others, but it often lacks what I have elsewhere claimed to be definitive of testimony. There are sometimes no original sources in even the attenuated senses that I noted in my book since rumour can arise from the merest speculation. Furthermore, the speaker of rumour will often have no competence with regard to the "information" conveyed and may be well aware of that. If we think some degree of authority or competence, no matter how minimal, is a precondition for giving testimony then quite a lot of rumour will be disqualified as testimony. There is a very amusing Australian radio show called "The Coodabeen Champions" in which several witty and very well-informed people comment on sporting events, especially Australian Rules football. In one segment of the show there is a "talk-back" session in which members of the public (in fact, the commentary team with disguised voices) raise topics for discussion. One regular always rang with a rumour, this being the show's acknowledgement of the fact that sporting culture is rife with rumours about secret injuries, the sacking of coaches, the transfer of
players, and so on. “Tony, have you heard the rumour”, he would begin. When pressed on his credentials, it would emerge that his brother’s wife’s uncle knew a bloke who had a neighbour who heard someone in his dentist’s waiting room say he thought he’d heard that if St Kilda suffered one more loss, the coach would be sacked. With credentials as thin as this, we may well want to treat such rumours as not testimony at all.

Nonetheless, they have at least the superficial appearance of testimony. They are not completely unrelated to it, so if we decide that rumours are not really or fully forms of testimony we will be treating them as what J. L. Austin called “misfires” rather than “abuses” of the speech acts of testifying. Austin’s early discussions of “performative utterances” identified a range of infelicities to which they could be prone in contrast to their failing to be true or false. The idea of infelicities carried over to his more sophisticated discussion of illocutionary and other speech acts. The concepts of misfires and abuses were forged to show different ways in which speech acts could be infelicitous. Misfires make the purported speech act go wrong in a way that nullifies it, whereas abuses constitute real but irregular performances of the act. To use one of Austin’s examples, it is a plausible precondition of successfully marrying that there exists an institutional framework within which the words “I do” serve to effect a marriage. But if, for example, you are already married (in a monogamous society) or the officiating officer is not really a licensed clergyman or appropriate civil official then you have merely gone through a form of marriage. The act has misfired, the marriage is void (Austin 1961: 223–8). By contrast, if you utter the vows of fidelity in the appropriate circumstances with no intention of keeping them you are still married, even if you are a genuine cad and the marriage hardly a paradigm of what it should be. Similarly an insincere promise may not be the best sort of model for promising, but it is still a promise and your commitment can be held against you when you fail to perform. Later, in *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin elaborated the distinction and produced sub-groups within misfires and abuses. Similarly, we might say that the rumour-monger’s lack of credentials makes his testimony void, as testimony, but he has nonetheless gone through a form of testimony; compare the marriage ceremony performed by a bogus clergyman or official. This case of misfired testimony would count as a misinvocation in Austin’s terms (Austin 1962: 14–20).

This gives us grounds for treating rumour as a pathology of testimony and giving a more precise sense to what that means.

**URBAN MYTH**

Urban myths have much in common with rumours. Indeed, in many respects, they could be seen as a type of rumour. But they have many distinctive features that make it plausible to treat them separately. They have, for instance, much
higher levels of narrative complexity. The “testimony” they offer is presented in the form of a fully fledged story where a rumour is usually rather less developed or embellished. A further difference is the abiding nature of the urban myth. Urban myths tend to survive their implausibility and even refutation in specific cases, and re-emerge, sometimes in slightly different dress, at another time and often place. Quite frequently, they have a kind of moral lesson attached to them, like Aesop’s Fables though not as explicit, and their revival is often triggered by issues of contemporary interest. In December 2002 there was an interesting episode in Tasmania, Australia, where it was widely reported that a truck driver had given a lift to a man of Middle Eastern appearance who left his wallet in the cabin after alighting in the capital city, Hobart. The honest truck driver called after the man who said to him in a rush of gratitude, “Don’t go near Salamanca Place on Saturday.” Salamanca Place is a popular market area near the waterfront and is always crowded on Saturday mornings. There was an American naval ship in the harbour. My son, David Coady, a philosopher at the University of Tasmania, was contacted by the media for comment and pointed out that this was a classic urban myth that had already surfaced elsewhere in slightly different forms. His view was publicized widely, panic was averted, and (fortunately for him and the reputation of philosophers) nothing alarming happened on the morning in question.

The truck driver story combines a moral element of virtue rewarded with a more general threatening element.

Then there are the many instances of humorous tales of vindication or revenge. A classic is the one that the avid collector of urban myths, Jan Harold Brunvand, has christened “the $50 Porsche” though the type of car varies with different national and cultural settings (Brunvand 1999: 77; 1981). One version of the story (in bare bones) goes as follows: Someone is reading the newspaper ads for used cars and sees an ad for a very recent model Mercedes (Porsche, Rolls Royce... available for sale for $50. He rings the number and a woman answers and says that it is truly available at the price. He goes to the address given and a beautiful woman comes out of an expensive house and shows him a spotless, perfectly maintained Mercedes only two years old. As he hands over the cheque, he asks how it could possibly be sold at such a price. She replies that her husband has recently left her for a younger woman but contacted her just the other day, in a spirit of “surely we can still be friends”, to ask her to sell his posh car since he needed an injection of funds, and to send the money on to him. This she was now doing!

There are other tales that build on primal fears. One is the spider’s eggs myth. Invariably the victim in the story is a woman. In basic outline the story goes that she has gone far off for a holiday, but before (or during) the holiday notices a small sore or lump on her face. At some time on the holiday, the sore swells and bursts, and a whole lot of baby spiders come out. Various embellishments concern whether she knows she was bitten by a spider or it happened while she was asleep, etc. Sometimes she dies of a heart attack. This story seems to have begun
in Northern Europe as late as 1980, but spread to venues in North America and elsewhere.

The field of stories that are called urban myths is very wide and contains much variation, but I shall take it that what I call "urban myth" is invariably false and ill-founded, though commonly enough believed to be true. One qualification that is needed to this is that a true but dramatic and surprising story, based on reliable testimony, may transmute into an urban myth with a life of its own. A case in point is the mathematician's story: "The Unsolvable Math Problem". The original true story concerned an episode in the career of the mathematician George B. Dantzig who, as a student at Berkeley in 1940, arrived late for a class given by Jerzy Neyman and noticed that there were two problems on the blackboard. Thinking they had been assigned for homework, he copied them down and went away and worked on them for several days. He then returned to his professor and apologized for taking so long, but they had been rather hard. He asked whether his teacher still wanted them and was told to put them on the desk. Six weeks or so later, he and his wife were awakened by banging on his door early one Sunday morning. It was Neyman saying that he had just written an introduction to the homework and wanted Dantzig to read it so he could send the lot off to a journal for publication. The homework had in fact been put on the board merely to show the class two famous, unsolved mathematical problems in statistics. Various versions of the true story were then in circulation for years afterwards as, for instance, the subject of sermons showing something or other about God or human character. In the course of this, they changed shape in all sorts of ways, even appearing in the film "Good Will Hunting". So this is a case of numerous fictional accounts having sprung from one apparently genuine happening faithfully recorded by Dantzig and, in part, easily checkable against the publication by Datzig of his solutions. Another form of truth for urban myth might be provided by life imitating fiction, if, for example, some deserted wife found herself in the advantageous position described in the "$50 Porsche" story and took instruction from it! But with these exceptions noted, it is part of qualifying for the title "urban myth" that the tale is false, though for any given story we may not know on hearing it whether it is urban myth or not. Being familiar with a number of urban myths, however, is a good recipe for recognizing others. This is partly because many of them merely ring changes upon the familiar ones, but also because there is a certain narrative style common to many urban myths. I have mentioned Aesop's Fables and another analogy is with biblical parables except that they are not intended to be believed as historical accounts and are often prefixed by phrases that indicate as much, such as "the kingdom of heaven is like ..." Often, urban myths play upon certain widespread fears or phobias, and there are some types of myth that invoke the wildly improbable or supernatural. Like rumours, it is usually quite unclear how one could check on the sources of the story. Where there are links in the chain of apparent testimony they quickly come to a halt well short of a reliable witness. Is urban myth a pathology of
testimony? Well, that depends on the degree to which it is presented as testimony or as fiction. Usually, the stories will be told as if true and based somehow on report, but sometimes they flourish merely because they are a good story. So, urban myth is a pathology of testimony in much the same way as rumour, though perhaps closer to fiction.

What general lessons should be drawn from this discussion? The first is that whether some communication is a degenerate form of testimony cannot be simply read off from the form or content of its telling, though either may give clues to this fact. A communication may have the usual hallmarks of an urban myth, for instance, and we may be wise to treat it as such, but it may turn out to be a case where truth is stranger than fiction and there is a reliable testimonial path to that truth. It seemed like an urban myth but it wasn’t. The second is that a pathological testimony need not be altogether worthless. The communication may rightly be judged unreliable but turn out to be true, as with certain rumours or lies. Liars can accidentally say what is true while meaning to say what is false and our knowledge of the background to the liar’s performance may enable us to spot this and profit from it. Somewhat similarly, a rumour-monger can hit upon the truth without being entitled to any confidence that it is true. This may indeed have been the case with the rumour emanating from the Peruvian Embassy about the planned attack on Pearl Harbor; the ambassador could have been right in his assessment of the general reliability of sources in the Peruvian Embassy. On the other hand, it might have been his assessment of their credibility that was at fault and the communication may not have deserved the title “rumour”. Once we have reason to characterize some communication as rumour, then equally we have reason to treat it as lacking credibility. It may, nonetheless, deserve further investigation, if the stakes are high enough, just in case it is true, or with the prospect of discovering some truth that it distorts. Once we establish that some communication is urban myth then we can be sure that it is false (with the minor qualifications noted earlier) but it remains possible that it is a revealing fiction. The matter is different with gossip. Once we have established that some communication is gossip, the question of its reliability and truth is (pace Russell) much the same as that of any other piece of testimony.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1. Tom Campbell tells me that there is a Glaswegian phrase for this: “having a good hing”.

2. A few are positively euphoric about the merits of gossip, most notably Ronald de Sousa (1994: 25–33). He seems to me far too dismissive of the downside of gossip and he exhibits a sort of romantic exaggeration of its benefits. He says “If all truths became public we would approach utopia” (1994: 31). This blatantly defies the fact that there is sometimes a significant value in privacy and confidentiality.

3. What I am calling the “unwelcome” aspect of gossip might be captured in other ways. It might be thought that my criterion turns too much on the psychology of
the gossipee or on what the gossips know of that psychology. David Rodin suggested instead that the information should be “unauthorized”. That might do, though there are then problems about who or what does the authorizing. I prefer to stick with “unwanted” and I note in the text and try to deal with some of the difficulties this choice raises. I suspect that there may be other ways of making the transgressive point that would demarcate a closely similar conceptual territory for our discussion.

4. This objection was put to me by Margaret Coady.
5. I owe this point to Ruth Zimmerling.
6. I owe this perceptive objection to John O’Neill of Lancaster University.
7. Somewhat similar points could be made about ordinary lies.
9. According to Brunvand, one of them is in the Annals of Mathematical Statistics, 1951. See Brunvand (1999: 452–6) for the full details of what he has christened, in a slightly misleading way, “The Unsolvable Math Problem”.
10. An exception is the virgin birth tale from the American Civil War (see Brunvand (1999: 469–72) where the story is called ‘Bullet Baby’) but it originated in an ingenious hoax by a reputable medical practitioner and is therefore not a typical urban myth.
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