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Evaluating Information in Theological Education: A Framework for Discussion [Poster]

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EVALUATING INFORMATION IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

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Problem Statement

“What is truth?” (John 18:38). Pilate’s frustrated retort to Jesus’s claim to “bear witness to the truth” accentuates a fundamental issue in information literacy: Not all claims to “bear witness to the truth” have the divine imprimatur. Much, if not all, human testimony to truth is constrained by normal limitations of time, space, cognitive capacity, competency, language, and so forth. “Real agents rely, when forming their beliefs, on imperfect informational sources (sources which deliver, even under normal conditions of operation, both accurate and inaccurate information). They therefore face the ‘endorsement problem’: how can beliefs produced by endorsing information received from imperfect sources be formed in an epistemically acceptable manner?” (Michaelian, 2012).

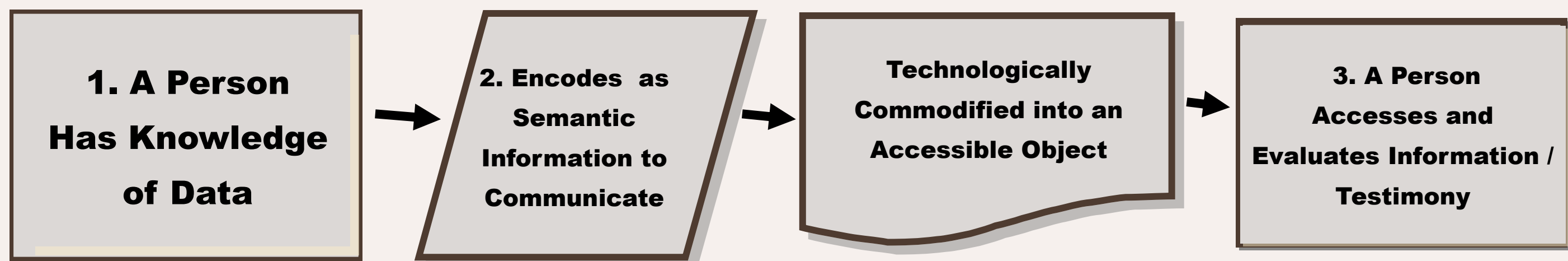
Information literacy as pedagogy targets the novice learner, and provides guidance in evaluating sources. Critical thinking dispositions and hermeneutical considerations are then employed to evaluate the claims. The standard output is some type of communication format which is then evaluated for competence. See Hjørland (2012) for a “catalog” of methods.

This pedagogical model works well in those areas of study in which facts are readily verifiable through means consistent with scientism, such as medicine and technology, so as to assume a single correct answer. But in the domain of spiritual knowledge, there is an added complexity: the pluralism embedded in history, culture, confessional commitments, and so forth.

How can we account for “spiritual discernment” in theological education? How far can standard accounts of information literacy take the inquirer reliably? What are the implications for “scholarship” in theological inquiry?

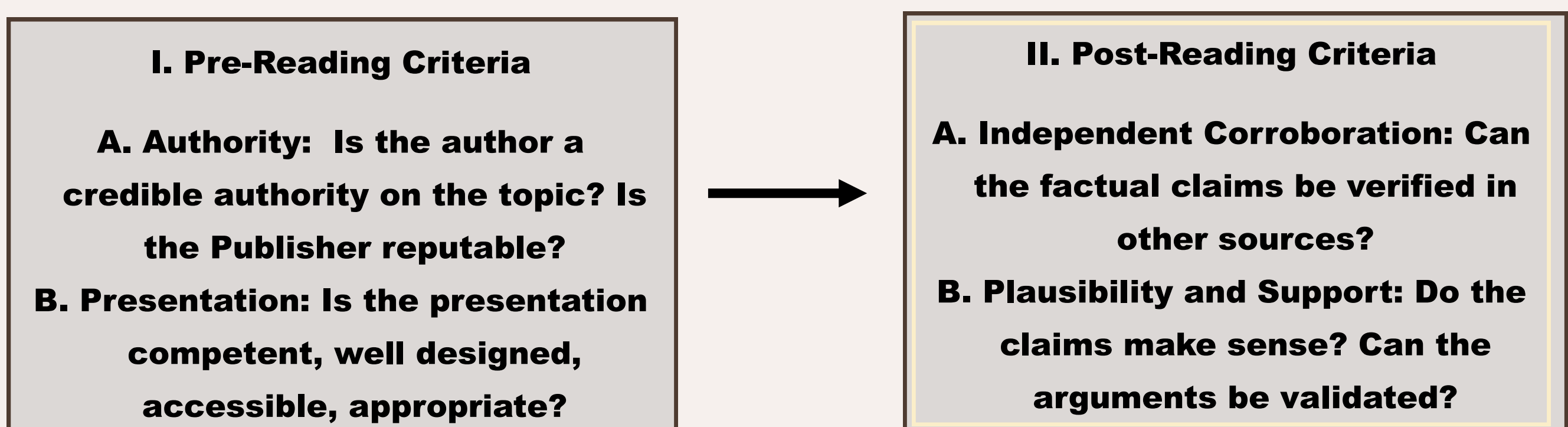
Definitions

- 1. Testimony:** a message that someone intentionally communicates. The focus is on the human agent, not on truthfulness, value or quality of content. (Pritchard, 2010, p. 80)
- 2. Semantic Information:** well-formed, meaningful, and truthful data. The focus is on content, and is contrasted with misinformation and disinformation (Floridi, 2011, p. 106)
- 3. Information Literacy:** the general competencies required to identify an information need, find information, evaluate the information, use the information ethically to purpose (ACRL, 2000).



Standard Information Literacy Toolkit for Evaluating Sources

Model developed using medical information websites. (Fallis, 2004)



Epistemology of Testimony: An Informational Construction

Most knowledge is normally communicated from one person to another through normal information channels:



An interdisciplinary discussion of the different facets of this transfer of knowledge is found through the various approaches to the epistemology of testimony. While *information theory* assumes the truth value of the content, and focuses on the technologies of creation, distribution, and access, the *epistemology of testimony* addresses the human agency, in which a person achieves knowledge, a justified and qualified true belief. The two perspectives intersect/overlap in discussions of reliability, hence repeated references to reliabilism.

- Reductionist: testimony can be accounted as justifying belief only if there is independent verification of the epistemic claims. (Hume)
- Credulist or Non-reductionist: testimony can be accounted as justifying belief except when there are defeaters. (Reid)
- Dualist: the content of the testimony can be used to justify belief only if both the speaker and the hearer are reliable epistemic agents, in which case, the achievement of knowledge is based on the words. (Lackey, 2007)
- Authority: the issue is not about using testimony to justify belief, but on how the hearer grants authority to the speaker. This analysis distinguishes between achieving knowledge by making up one’s own mind (trusting the argument) or at second-hand (trusting the testifier). (McMyler, 2011)
- Accountability: since all knowledge is achieved through reliance on others by means of testimony, the hearer is ultimately accountable for managing testimonial knowledge, an assessable competency. (Goldberg, 2010)
- Cooperation: Knowledge can be obtained through testimony alone, but only if it is deemed reasonable by the audience to do so, both because of their prior knowledge and also in recognition of the Accuracy and Sincerity of the speaker. These reasons invoke a spirit cooperation between the speaker and the audience, evidenced by adherence to the social norms of such communication. (Faulkner, 2011).
- Justice: Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer gives less credibility to a speaker than would otherwise be the case because of prejudice, whether race, gender, or other form. (Fricker, 2007).

Value/Contribution

The value of these discussions of the epistemology of testimony for information literacy pedagogy lies in

- the epistemological grounding of the evaluation of information in everyday communication;
- providing a useful vocabulary for discussing the various reasons behind the approaches;
- clarifying issues with regard to veridical information.

Because of the historical and cultural character of religion, “testimony” plays a significant role in the social transmission of religious knowledge.

Ideal Outcome

Reliable trustworthy Speakers produce veridical information that is accessed correctly by reliable and competent Hearers.

Novice	Accomplished
Seeks reliable sources Authoritative authors, reputable publishers Emphasis on hierarchical search strategies	Seeks reliable arguments Assumes strong prior knowledge Emphasis on networking search strategies
Verifies factual information Evaluation skills learned through mentoring	Validates arguments using sound hermeneutics Competent evaluation skills, self-reliant
Reports on findings Knowledge at second hand	Enters into conversation with peers Knowledge at first hand

Application to Academic Writing Learning Trajectories

Evaluating Theological Information Open Questions for Discussion

In the academic setting, a novice learner is confronted with a complex array of testimony. Because spiritual testimony must be spiritually discerned, the conventional standards for information literacy need qualification.

- Authority: what constitutes authority? Is it granted for individual achievement or competence, or does it reside in the community? How is the novice learner to recognize valid authority? Is it only on the say so of mentors? A claim to Scriptural authority is valid, but then implies reliable hermeneutics to rightly understand and apply. Who can be trusted to train in proper hermeneutics? Unqualified, relying on external authority alone reduces evaluation to a majority opinion. How can we incorporate the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in this process? How do we recognize the authority of the Holy Spirit?
- Presentation: what about optical allusions and virtual realities? The Scriptures are replete with accounts of deception in which the messenger appeared as an angel of light. Poor presentations are distracting, but good presentations do not guarantee truth. How can we use this criteria for spiritual evaluation?
- Independent Corroboration: What are the “spiritual facts?” How are they assessed? What are the right questions? How can one claim be determined to be more truthful than any other claim? In the face of pluralist claims, the criteria for identifying truth are ambiguous. How independent must the corroboration be?
- Plausibility: Current cultural trends on spirituality suggest that any claim can be construed to be plausible. How can scholarship maintain its integrity without recourse to positivistic certainty? How does faith interface?

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