Expertise as Practice: A Response to DeVasto

Zoltan Majdik, North Dakota State University


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A few years ago, Bill Keith and I wrote a paper on rethinking the concept of expertise as a kind of argument, which opened by noting that “expertise” contains an essential tension between authority and democracy.¹ DeVasto’s recent article on expertise prompted me to rethink and extend some of our ideas in light of her argument for focusing more attention on (multiple) ontological and practice-based grounds for expertise. In this response to her paper, I want to suggest that to think of expertise as ontological is to think of expertise as a tension—that the subject matter of expertise across all domains of expert engagement can productively be understood as a kind of tension, and that the practice, the *doing*, of expertise lies in the resolution of tension. In other words, to think of expertise as a “doing,” as an ontology, all the way down, to be concerned with “patterns of practice”² as the ontology of expertise, is to understand expertise as an ongoing tension—with attendant deliberative demands and opportunities toward resolution—that encompasses political (between the authority of the few and a common interest), epistemic (between knowledge that is credentialed, and knowledge that is otherwise acquired), and moral (between legitimating the norms and practices of different groups, based on their rightness in a given context) aspects.

Early in her paper, DeVasto notes that the crux of scholarship on expertise is the “unresolved question of how to determine pertinent experts.”³ There are numerous ways of trying to resolve this question, by providing structural models of expertise that tend to catalogue expertises in taxonomies, in decision charts, in inclusion networks, or in domains or regimes associated with questions of fact and value. These can be categorized by historical waves, classified by degrees of inclusiveness, parsed by types and degrees of experience, and so on. Most models of determining inclusiveness, including the ones DeVasto cites, do so based on criteria fixed in the past: potential experts either have or have not acquired some kind of knowledge that would grant them expertise in a given situation, either because they have studied such situations or have experienced them. These selection criteria are reasonable in many cases, as they provide some normative stability to the determination of expertise, and so help push back against the kind of democratization of expertise we saw in the second wave of science studies. But they also lack situational flexibility, because they are built on how people have understood or managed exigent problems in the past.

Problems that require expertise, however, can sometimes emerge in new and unique ways, rendering systems of expert classification built on past experience difficult to work with. L’Aquila was precisely such a problem—a fact noted by Carl Herndl’s response to DeVasto as a potential barrier to the generalizability of her argument.⁴ Yet, I’d argue that maybe the uniqueness of the L’Aquila case is precisely what gives strength to DeVasto’s claims. Her multiple ontologies frame can, I believe, work as a system for “determining pertinent experts” that is more nimble than a system based on past experience can be. Her use of Mol’s somewhat Wittgensteinian approach to ontology, and her argument for multiple ontologies as a guiding framework for expertise, moves toward that goal. Though I might

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¹ Majdik and Keith, “Expertise as Argument.”
³ Ibid., 374.
⁴ Herndl, “Doing and Knowing in the L’Aquila Case.”
argue with some details, the new materialism approach does open a space for thinking not about legitimate classifications of expertise, but about the constitution of expertise itself in and as a practice.

DeVasto’s rejection of a “politics of who” illustrates this point. Pushing our understanding of expertise toward ontologies, hooked into practices, shifts emphasis from determining who qualifies as expert based on their past experience or knowledge, toward how expertise gets constituted in a situation—the “what” that is comprised by the practices emerging in a situation. But at times, DeVasto’s mapping of a multiple materialities framework onto the L’Aquila case simply recreates Collins and Evans’ classificatory model. Replacing their epistemic heuristic for classifying expertise with an ontological one—replacing the “who/how” with the “what”—ends up with the same four buckets of expertise, albeit now underwritten by ontological grounds: we have, in DeVasto’s analysis, still interactional ontology, contributory ontology, etc. She argues this point herself: “the types of expertise proposed put forth by Collins and Evans are actually distinct ontologies.” This is, of course, not wrong: these are categories of expertise we encounter, and they are well conceptualized and well mapped onto actual exigent situations. But it raises the question of what we gain by moving to new materialism, practice, and multiple ontologies—what is the upside, if all we do is recreate an existing classificatory system?

DeVasto’s circling-back to Collins and Evans’ categories obscures the fact that shifting our perspective on expertise to its ontology via practice may do more than map onto existing categories. It may give us an out from a rigid classificatory system. “Practice,” after all, isn’t just inert materiality: it is, as DeVasto recognizes, an act, by which materialities are situated, positioned, actuated relative to people and exigencies and constraints. It is how we get from Ontology to multiple ontologies, from “experiencing an earthquake” to “‘doing’ earthquakes.” As DeVasto shows, the value of Mol’s work isn’t simply that it “deconstructs the expert/lay binary,” which, after all, Collins & Evans and many others had already done, and done well. It is that it escapes simply reconstituting it into another expert/lay binary. Mol’s, and DeVasto’s, contributions are meaningful in drawing attention to the legitimization and enactment of expertise as a practice in its own right, not in recreating new systems of classifications. They draw attention to the selection mechanism for choosing experts as being expertise, rather than as a means toward granting legitimacy to a group of experts. “How to determine pertinent experts” is itself what expertise does, is its ontology, its practice, not merely an epistemic heuristic by which we gain knowledge of who the proper experts are. This is what I meant when I referred to expertise as ontological all the way down.

5. The notion, for example, that materiality can shift too far from the linguistic and perspectival. Cf. e.g., Knorr Cetina, who shows just how deep the role of language (as “imaginative terminological repertoires” in experimental physics), along with practices, can go in positioning objects in practices and enactments. Knorr Cetina, Epistemic Cultures, 112.
7. Ibid., 384.
8. Ibid., 377.
Hence, in DeVasto’s view of expertise grounded in practices, we gain something in how we theorize expertise. Enacting expertise is not to use an existing body of knowledge—static, a priori sets of facts, skills, or experiences—that either fit or do not fit an exigent situation. Enacting expertise is to choose, deconstruct, assemble, test, and legitimize what knowledge best fits a situation. It is, thus, practical knowledge, phronesis, a kind of knowledge-making—a grappling with and discerning not only the epistemic dimension of knowledge as it ought to properly pertain to a problem, but also its structural and moral dimensions. It is a moral practice, in the sense Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky talk about moral judgments and the valuing of consequences of risk as questions of social criticism and communal consent, and in the sense that Jürgen Habermas distinguishes moral-practical expressions having to do with the rightness of actions from the instrumentality of discourse that aims to validate truths. The enactment of expertise is to discern and engage tensions between different sets of facts, actors, norms, and skill, legitimizing and justifying the their appropriateness relative to a situation. This is a long way of saying that expertise is not only located in the practices of those addressing exigent situations, but that expertise is a kind of practice itself.

DeVasto recognizes all this. As she shows in her conclusion, the fact that “people move among sites of practise” in enacting different ontologies demonstrates the conceptual flexibility of a multiple ontologies framework. More importantly, she argues here for the importance of examining “how science-policy decision-making is conducted rather than remaining focused only on who should be present.” It is precisely this capacity of the theoretical framework she builds for pulling together sometimes related, sometimes divergent sets of practices into an intelligible model of expertise that makes this paper meaningful.

If DeVasto’s use of Mol’s multiple ontologies is to open new ways of recognizing legitimate and pertinent expertise in the practices of people, groups, and institutions, then a next step is to disentangle the “what” of the ontological perspective. Her move from a “politics of who” to a “politics of what” introduces a practical challenge. A practice-based view of selecting experts in situ eschews the use of simple, predetermined procedures: is is made up both of things old and new and of people from outside and within the problem at hand, and their “thrownness” (to use Heidegger’s fitting term) into an exigent situation. It is constituted by what’s there (both in terms of the objects at hand, and the institutional norms that guide their use and the interactions of people with them) just as much as it constitutes what’s there: practices create new objects, and challenge or reaffirm existing norms, hence altering the landscape of the “there.” To use ontology and practice as a means of “recognizing pertinent experts” requires understanding how such an expertise-as-practice can function.

Doing so is beyond the scope of my response paper, but in the spirit of the Review & Reply Collective’s discussion-centric format, I will make some suggestions. One is to return to the

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12. Ibid., 374.
epistemological function of expertise, but consider it within the context of an ontological/practice-centric model. If expertise is a kind of knowledge-in-making, its epistemological function—the information it can furnish for how to address an exigent situation—emerges downstream from the social and linguistic practices that go into resolving tensions about facts, norms, people, and skills. Expertise so undeniably has an epistemological function, but it is not its epistemological function. We find this kind of thinking about epistemology and practice in Giambattista Vico’s epistemology, and in particular his notion of a sensus communis. As John Schaeffer outlines, the relationship between sensus communis, language, imagination, and epistemology in Vico is complex. One way to situate them is through the idea of practice, in the sense in which Vico locates concepts of language and knowledge closer to practice than to the kind of logical-deductive, Cartesian reasoning common at his time. “Eloquence,” argues Schaeffer, “does not merely mean speaking well; it means speaking the truth effectively in the public sphere.” Along with prudence, its design is to “make wisdom effective in civic life,” which is where “the community requires that concrete decisions [about matters of probability] be made in specific circumstances.” And that sense of community—of the “what” of community, the “prelogical” awareness of community—comes from a sensus communis that contains “conventional meanings” and “similitudes” which make “community choice possible.”

We are, of course, a long way from the technical discussion of expertise in STS and related fields. But I suggest that broadening our focus to a place like Vico can be instructive, because it offers a deeply linguistic understanding of the kinds of on-the-ground practices that underwrite determinations of expertise in a multiple ontological framework. Concepts like imagination and similitude (precisely defined as in Vico’s work, or extended to places like Wittgenstein’s family resemblance) can serve to make concrete the linguistic, rhetorical structures that are at work in the complex, dynamic practice of expertise outlined by DeVasto and necessary for cases like the L’Aquila one.

A second aspect to consider is audience. Enactments of expertise have audiences, as well as are constituted by audiences—they address an audience, and are given legitimacy as “being expert” by that audience. Both these directions—the ontological “what” that makes expertise, and the epistemological “how” that conveys knowledge through expertise—work through the complex social contract of trust. We cannot talk about an ontology or an epistemology of expertise without considering the notion that the constitution of expertise as well as its social/epistemological function can exist only if experts and their audiences trust each other. And when we talk about expertise and trust, we are talking about Anthony Giddens, who sees both expertise and trust as central to the functioning of a late-modern social structure in which individuals engage with and are engaged by disembedded social institutions, and their norms about life abstracted from local place by an “emptying out of time and space.”

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15. Ibid., 163.
16. Ibid., 163.
For Giddens, the facts and norms of social institutions “coordinate social activities without necessary reference to the particularities of place.”\textsuperscript{18} Yet, and seemingly paradoxically at first, it is precisely this “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time-space\textsuperscript{19} that allows for more coordinated, more precise modes of interaction. Giddens’ theory here speaks to the “place-ness” of expertise: this notion I briefly mention above that the challenge of expertise lies in the fact that it throws together highly local, idiosyncratic, particular features of a place with the generalized knowledge and practices of institutions (be they scientific, legal, economical, or otherwise) that are purposefully abstracted from the characteristics of the local. In fact, expertise to Giddens is the “disembedding mechanism” by which social institutions manage to “brace time and space through technical knowledge.” And expert systems, along with a second disembedding mechanism (symbolic tokens), “depend in an essential way on trust” to function in our late modern space.\textsuperscript{20} Hence, to see expertise in place and in practice, without abandoning the important function of institutionalized norms and knowledge as bases for determining expert knowledge, is to see it through a kind of interplay between institutional logic and local agency, mediated by trust. Here, it may be that the practice of crafting trust becomes a critical dimension of enacting expertise.

Considering audience and trust, and considering communality and a historical situatedness of language, as two possible directions for continuing a conversation on expertise may open the scope of academic inquiry on the topic beyond the commonly referenced STS-centric themes. In politics, for example, the role of expertise in the recent “Brexit” vote in the U.K. has been framed as a repudiation of experts, but maybe could be researched with some more nuance from a vantage point that sees expertise as partly constituted by considerations of audience, trust, and community. Whichever way further discussions go, they will benefit from DeVasto’s challenge, and Herndl’s added insights in this forum, to our understandings of expertise as a social practice.

Contact details: zoltan.majdik@ndsu.edu

References


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 18.