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Circles or Regresses? The Problem of Genuine Expertise

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Jamie Carlin Watson’s article raises some crucial questions about expertise, and about its relation to truth and competence, questions on which discussions of expertise have usually foundered, or at least run up against and tried to avoid. One can summarize the problem as the question of whether expertise, or a given claim to expertise, is genuine or valid.

The problem, as Watson shows, is tougher than it appears. The easiest way out is to epistemologize it, by linking expertise to true beliefs. This off-loads the problem of expertise into a problem of truth, which presumably is easier to resolve. The problem with this approach is that expertise does not in fact, and cannot in principle, work in this way. When we rely on experts, it is because we don’t know for ourselves what is true. Nor can we impose tests of reliability on them, at least not easily or directly.

Determining whether they possess a set of true (or at least credible) beliefs would require us to possess the relevant true beliefs ourselves. It would require also meta-knowledge about the content of their beliefs—not merely sharing them, but having knowledge of their truth. Judging something to be true, in expertise contexts, is a matter requiring expertise.

Indeed, this is almost the definition of expertise: we can “understand” what the expert is telling us, but what makes for genuine expertise is the ability to make epistemic judgments about the truth of what the expert says, without relying on their status—their reputation, as experts. The model of testimony doesn’t help here. Assessing their reliability as testifiers would require even more knowledge, knowledge of their past testimony, knowledge of what standard of reliability to apply, for example, on the analogy of eye-witnessing, knowledge of how good eye-witnessing in general is.

Can a History of Performance Justify Expertise?

On the surface, it looks like it would be simpler to just assess expert performances. Did the surgeon’s patients live or die? Did the football coach win or lose? But this runs into the same regress problems. Who is able to judge such things? Did the surgeon take on difficult cases, and have a lower success rate than the surgeon who took only easy cases. This is a real-world issue that figures in actual health regulation discussions, not merely an academic hypothetical.

And the same goes for coaches. Did they exceed expectations or fall below them, given the team they were coaching and its talent? This kind of judgment seems to require a great deal of meta-expertise. And one can ask where the expectations came from? So this expertise is subject to the same sorts of regress problems.

And there is yet another problem with these judgments—circularity or uninformative-ness. I can illustrate this by a response my own mother—a physician in a surgical specialty—once gave me to my question “how can I tell if a surgeon is any good?” Her answer—“you need to look at their technique.”

Of course, the prospective patient never has an opportunity to do this, but in any case would have no idea what a good surgical technique looked like, even if they could look. So this is completely uninformative. But it is also circular. One never gets out of the circle of expertise in this case, and this is characteristic: evaluation of expert judgment, even if it is formalized peer judgment, is more expert judgment.

No Reputation Need Be Genuine

The reputational theory of expertise, if we can call it that, does not rely on truth, at least the truth of the expert's beliefs. It says instead that to be an expert is to be reputed to be an expert. Expert authority is analogous to political legitimacy in the sociological rather than normative sense; this kind of legitimacy, if it produces obedience, is "real."

The analogous view of expertise, similarly, ignores the normative question of whether expertise is real in the sense of being valid. This kind of assessment does not rely on expert judgment. It needs only the ordinary judgment of people who need only to have in their possession ordinary facts about reputation.

This seems pretty empty. Can't people have fake reputations, based on erroneous beliefs about their competence or honesty? But there is more to it. The paper explicitly says it is avoiding a discussion of reputational views of expertise, and rejects them, but it seems to me that this rejection is subject to the same kind of argument the paper makes with respect to performance: it is caused.

One might ask what causes reputation—it is not something separate from either performance or credible beliefs. Indeed, how do you get reputation without performance, in some sense? What is the reputation for? How does one get it? One might say that the "reputational theory" is neutral between means of acquiring a reputation—it could be performance, recognition of the possession of true beliefs, or both, with the caveat that "true" is audience relative. And this seems to mean that reputation doesn't answer the question of genuineness. But to get a reputation you need to do something real, and that also seems to be the point of the argument against the separation of belief and performance.

This does help. One need not be an expert to raise and judge the answers to ordinary questions about how someone got their reputation. One can be wrong, of course. But there is a plethora of ordinary fact available to the person who wants to know, for example, how a surgeon got their reputation or came to be accredited with their expertise.

Relying on this kind of fact, even if it is fallible, avoids the problem of the circularity of basing assessments of expertise on other assessments of expertise. It can include such assessments, for example, evidence of peer judgment by other experts. But it looks on this kind of evidence not as an expert but as a consumer of the processes that generate the judgment, and asks whether they are fair, or produce good results for other consumers.

From this point of view, expertise is an agency problem—a problem of asymmetric information (though the term "information" makes it seem as though information for the

expert is the same thing as information for the non-expert, which misses the point of expertise)—which the producer of expertise has a large role in resolving.

It can't be resolved directly, by the reiteration of expert claims. There truth is the issue, and the point is that the consumer as non-expert can't assess them. This is characteristic of a large class of relationships, where the issue is resolved in different ways (cf. Turner 1990). So the expert needs to establish credibility indirectly, through such things as processes of certification, which do not take expertise to at least get a sense of the value of.

I've argued elsewhere that these processes are central to science as a whole (Turner 2002). But I also think that they are the only real answer to the question of validity from an external point of view. Direct judgments of truth are the business of the expert. But this should not distract us from the fact that expertise is a relation between experts and consumers of expertise. Experts are not just knowers. They are people making claims within a social relationship.

The Deeper Problems of Expertise

This key feature of expertise points to a deep problem, which on examination is perhaps not so deep, and primarily a semantic one. There is an overwhelming sense that an expert is someone who possesses something, and that this possession is what marks genuine expertise out from fake expertise, such as merely reputed expertise.

A reputation is a possession, just a possession of the wrong kind, because it fails to guarantee genuineness. And this is what motivates the argument that the existence of expertise does not depend on the existence of non-experts. But there is a difference between having an ability—say that of a four octave coloratura soprano—and justifiable credibility about what the possessor of this ability might say about it. Whether it is actualized or not, expertise is a social relation. The strength of the testimony view of expertise was that it recognized this implicitly.

But “reliability,” the concept it is associated with, doesn't work because it implies a record of acts or pronouncements on which users rely. So perhaps we need a better word: trustability, or if we loathe linguistic inventions, trustworthiness with respect to epistemic pronouncements. This keeps the idea of possession, and the recognition that it pertains to a social relation, and allows for multiple grounds for trust, and most importantly, grounds that do not depend, circularly, on the relevant expertise.

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