The Epistemic Authority of Practice

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Abstract

We often engage with epistemic authorities in order to gain access to certain kinds of epistemic goods. But philosophical accounts of such authority often fail to recognise the complexity of the non-idealised and real relationships we have with such authorities. I suggest a novel way to conceptualise individuals with epistemic authority: as agents who can provide us with access to an *epistemic practice* that we would otherwise, due to a lack of expertise, not have access to. I call this the *epistemic authority of practice*. Consideration of this sense of epistemic authority, I argue, more clearly explains how such authorities can play a diverse range of roles in our lives: as sources of true belief, providers of understanding, but also as intellectual collaborators, and educational guides. The account properly locates the source of such authority not in any individual per se, but in the social-epistemic practice that provides us with access to our desired epistemic outcomes.

The normative force of epistemic authority

An epistemic authority is an agent who has a more reliable access to some epistemic good than myself. They typically know more true things pertinent to their domain of inquiry. They are aware of, and can appropriately weigh, the relevant evidence. They can take the right steps to answer new questions and pursue new avenues of inquiry as they arise. Moreover, they possess the relevant background and contextualising knowledge to do all this, and exhibit the rational and cognitive skills required to infer the right conclusions (or at least to avoid the wrong ones) at a more reliable rate than others. In wanting to access epistemic goods that I do not have the skills, knowledge, or time to pursue on my own, one could argue, it would be rational for me to put aside my own reasoning or judgement in favour of basing my beliefs instead on the recognised judgement of an authority. This may be the case even if, as the case will often be, I do not myself have direct access to the relevant reasoning and evidence. In a non-idealised world that requires us to

divide our intellectual labour and to trust in one another as epistemic agents, this kind of relationship remains essential to our ability to function as social-epistemic agents.[1]

There are a variety of accounts of such epistemic authority, and the related notion of intellectual expertise. Michel Croce, for one, has provided the beginnings of an illuminating taxonomy of such concepts (Croce, 2019). Though there are numerous ways of defining intellectual expertise,[2] one key observation to make here is that our typical use of the word 'expert' tends to confound a purely descriptive sense of the word with a normatively laden one. Descriptively, one could say that an intellectual expert is someone who possesses certain skills and/or knowledge pertinent to a specific domain of inquiry. Someone can be an expert on a subject matter without necessarily holding any special normative status over us. For example: though I do not believe in the mystical influences of planetary movements, I may nevertheless recognise Mystic Meg as an expert in astrology. We do, however, also use the term 'expert' to suggest something beyond the descriptive: 'The experts say that consuming saturated fats is bad for your health', or, 'I think you should listen to what Jorge is saying, he is an expert'. In these cases, someone's expertise provides a normative effect and status: it suggests something about how we ought to conduct ourselves, epistemically speaking.

The notion of epistemic authority I focus on elucidating here has a strong normative component, and aims to make sense of the normative status and effect illuminated by the examples just given. In trying to articulate an account of such authority, we aim to describe a set of conditions that, when met, can provide normatively forceful reasons for epistemic agents to behave in a specific epistemic fashion. One could say that, for instance, if an epistemic authority believes that p, then I *ought* to believe that p as well.

For clarity's sake, I will use the terms 'expertise' and 'epistemic authority' with one key distinction in mind:

> *Expertise* will be understood in non-relational terms, as a quality, or qualities, that an individual epistemic agent S may have, by virtue of their training, skills, acquired knowledge, etc., that allows S to participate in some specialised, epistemic process.

[1] Our reliance on others in acquiring knowledge of the world has been well accounted for. One may even argue that, given the pervasiveness of the division of intellectual labour and the diversity of intellectual expertise required in society, knowledge itself is often not a property of individuals, but of groups. For a discussion of these and related issues, see (Hardwig, 1985), (Hardwig, 1991), and (Miller, 2015).

[2] See the seminal (Goldman, 2001), as well as (Goldman, 2018), (Grundmann, 2023), (Quast, 2018), and, again, Croce (2019).

> *Epistemic authority* will be understood in relational terms, as a status that one epistemic agent S may have over another, S*, by virtue of having some epistemic status that S* lacks, by varying degrees, in which this status confers to S some kind of normative power to modify the epistemic behaviour of S*.

Linda Zagzebski is responsible for popularising the notion of epistemic authority I have in mind (2012). Adopting aspects of Joseph Raz's theory of political authority (1988), Zagzebski suggests that an epistemic authority is someone whom I recognise as being more conscientious than myself in answering certain kinds of questions, i.e. someone who has spent the time honing a relevant set of epistemic skills, carefully surveying and analysing evidence, and so forth. They are agents who, Zagzebski claims, in fact do what *I* would do if I *had* spent the time to hone the relevant skills, surveying evidence, etc. For any question that may be asked relative to a certain domain of inquiry, then, an epistemic authority is someone who is more likely to formulate the appropriate doxastic state.

Zagzebski argues that, if an epistemic authority holds a certain belief p, then it is rational for me to deferentially believe that p for the reason that I am more likely to form a true belief via such deference than I would if I were to form a belief solely on the basis of my own reasoning. Zagzebski thus stipulates the following condition on epistemic authority:

> *The Preemption condition*:
> 'The fact that the authority has a belief p is a reason for me to believe p that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing p and is not simply added to them.' (Zagzebski, 2012, p. 107).

This condition suggests that, when I ascertain that an epistemic authority believes some proposition p, then I ought to believe that p, disregarding all other evidence or reasons I have for or against a belief that p. I do not weigh the authoritative belief against my own reasons, evidence, or beliefs: rather, I believe that p *solely* on the authority of another's believing it.

Why should I discard my reasons? For the simple reason that, if I were to weigh my reason's against the authority's belief, then I would potentially end up with a doxastic state non-identical than the authority's, and thus, by hypothesis, less likely to reliably track the truth. Even if I were to weigh the authority's input very heavily against my own reasons, I would nevertheless end up less reliably tracking the facts: where an authority has a credence of .78 that p, and I weigh that against my own prior reasons that favour a belief in not-p, I will end up with a lower credence in p than the authority, who, by hypothesis, has a better chance of

settling on the right credence concerning a belief in p. If tracking the truth, having more true beliefs than false, and adopting the right level or credence of belief in light of the existing evidence are all values central to being good epistemic agents, then Zagzebski's argument suggests that preemptive deference is necessary.

Preemption is a strong condition. Unsurprisingly, it has been met with much criticism. One issue concerns how we are to make sense of such authority *vis-á-vis* the important value of epistemic autonomy. If we are to agree that one ought to 'think *for oneself*', as Immanuel Kant famously suggests (1951), one may wonder how such an injunction is compatible with the kind of preemptive belief that Zagzebski prescribes.

This issue with the Preemption condition has been well illustrated by others.[3] Believing preemptively has the consequence of alienating us from our own reasons, and, moreover, suggests the psychologically implausible: it enjoins us to possess reasons that have no justificatory pull or effect on our actual doxastic states. If I have a reason r that supports the conclusion that p, but I find out that an epistemic authority believes that not-p, Preemption suggests that I ought to believe that not-p in such a way that r has not effect on the strength of that belief (either in diminishing or elevating my credence). Following Christoph Jäger, we could call this the problem of 'unhinging proper bases', in which we cancel the epistemic basing relationship between our reasons and our beliefs (2016, 174).

The Preemptivist could, at this point, bite the bullet. Zagzebski herself suggests that, when considering our choice to defer to an epistemic authority or not, our choice is between two epistemic values: the good of having more true beliefs and fewer false ones, and the good of having beliefs that are reflective of the totality of our reasons and evidence. Given that in some cases both cannot be simultaneously and equally attained, Zagzebski concludes that we ought to favour the good of acquiring true beliefs. One could think of this as being an unavoidable consequence of being limited and non-ideal agents in a non-ideal world.

In light of this issue, a variety of alternative Preemptivist views of epistemic authority have been defended.[4] My project here is to present an account that I think can do justice to the intuition that authority involves a strong normative power, as Zagzebski suggests, but appropriately grounds this power in the non-idealised and actual social-epistemic practices that govern real-life epistemic behaviours.

[3] See (Dormandy, 2015), (Dormandy, 2018), (Jäger, 2016), (Jäger, forthcoming), and (Popowicz, 2019).

[4] Including accounts from Katherine Dormandy (2018), Jan Constantin and Thomas Grundmann (2020), Jäger (2016), and Croce (2017).

Other considerations for an account of epistemic authority

Many accounts of epistemic authority present a very idealised, atomistic, and individualised kind of relationship as their exemplars. Though it is certainly the case that we engage with epistemic authorities in order to gain a better access to the truth—in terms of acquiring more true beliefs—it is also the case that the manner that we engage with epistemic authorities may differ in ways that this simple reduction to truth acquisition fails to acknowledge. Our engagement with epistemic authorities in everyday life, as part of the rich fabric of our social-epistemic lives, is a complicated affair, and a full account of epistemic authority would have to make sense of this complexity, including at a minimum the following two, connected desiderata:

1. (*Why?*) We engage with epistemic authorities in pursuit of a wide variety of epistemic goods, not merely true beliefs. I may also engage with an epistemic authority for the sake of developing my own sense of understanding about some matter, for example, or for the sake of acquiring all the available evidence relevant to a question one wishes to answer, or even to go as far as to acquire the epistemic skills to acquire evidence and answer questions independently.

2. (*How?*) Depending on a variety of factors, listed below, the dynamics of the epistemic-authority-to-non-authority relationship will vary significantly. Importantly, in some disciplines or domains of inquiry, this relationship will not always take the form of an authority merely sharing information with a non-authority in a unidirectional fashion, and may, contrary to Zagzebski's Preemption condition, require non-authorities to share and utilise their own reasons and evidence.

In defence of consideration (1), it suffices to simply consider cases in which one defers to an authority in seeking some kind of understanding, or other epistemic state more complicated than belief. Jäger, in illuminating this kind of relationship, develops what he refers to as the *Socratic Epistemic Authority* (2016). If Jäger is right about the potential for communicating understanding in this way, then any complete accounting of epistemic authority will have to make sense of this kind engagement. The account I provide below broadens things and makes room for the possibility of epistemic authorities providing non-authorities with the means of acquiring epistemic goods beyond mere first-order beliefs of a domain of inquiry, or any related understanding of those first-order issues.

(2) simply illuminates what I take to be an obvious empirical fact: the dynamics of my relationship with an epistemic authority will vary depending on a variety of

details all too often idealised away or disregarded in the philosophical literature. These details may include:

(a) The level of disparity between the authority and non-authority's level of skill, ability, and know-how required to partake in the relevant epistemic practice, which can range from wide to narrow.

(b) The kinds of evidence a non-authority has access to may be more or less accessible to the authority.

(c) The kinds of evidence that a non-authority has access to may be more or less relevant to the epistemic practice in question.

(d) The nature of the questions that the epistemic practice aims to answer may be more or less objective, in the sense that some answers to such questions may be more or less dependent on the subjective perspective of the non-authority who seeks the answers.

(e) The nature of the questions the epistemic practice aims to answer may have more or less *practical* import, meaning that the non-authority may have more or less at risk in accepting the outputs of said practice.

There are, undoubtedly, other relevant details that I have failed to list. These items are at least sufficient for illustrating my point, however. To briefly explicate some of these issues, consider the difference between the following cases.

> *Case A*
> I, a non-physicist, engage with renowned physicist Peter Higgs who is my epistemic authority when it comes the study of physics. Given that I cannot reasonably expect to acquire a deep understanding of sub-atomic theory (I do not currently possess the mathematical skillset necessary), I engage with him merely in order to acquire a relevant set of true beliefs. In this case, the kind of evidence I have access to is evidence that Higgs also has access to, and, more importantly, is likely evidence that is completely irrelevant to the inquiry under consideration (e.g. the fact that I observe macro-objects behaving a certain way doesn't tell me much about quark behaviour).

> *Case B*
> I am a patient seeking medical advice from my primary care physician. Here I am likely looking for a lot more than mere true belief in answering questions such as 'What disease do I have?', or 'What is

> the most likely course of action that will cure or heal me?'. Arguably, in engaging with my epistemic authority in this case, I will be looking for a broader epistemic foundation from which I can make sound decisions about my future. I also have direct access to evidence that the doctor may not, such as my first-personal experiences and symptoms. More crucially, the evidence I have access to is significantly relevant to the inquiry and epistemic practice in question. There is also a significant personal element at play: the answers I seek in such a case are not purely objective, but are subjectively dependent on my personal values and preferences (do I prefer living for a shorter time with a higher quality of life rather than living as long as I can at whatever cost, for instance); the answers also have a significant practical weight for me (they could, indeed, be life or death).[5]

These differences between cases A and B are substantial. It would be beneficial to have an account of epistemic authority that could explain the kinds of relationships that are more akin to the one described in case B as well as ones reminiscent of A, which the philosophical literature has primarily focused on. My account, then, aims to make sense of this complexity without oversimplifying or idealising the real way in which we engage with those that know better than we.

The epistemic authority of practice

In light of the above considerations, my suggestion is that we more broadly think of epistemic authorities not foremost as individuals with more true beliefs, or a more reliable access to true beliefs in a certain domain of inquiry, but rather as practitioners of a certain kind of epistemic practice through which a wide variety of epistemic goods can be attained. Such an account, I argue, can explain the phenomena that other accounts of epistemic authority aim to account for, but also a wide variety of other considerations, such as the diverse roles and relationships that one can have with an epistemic authority, as noted above.[6]

[5] I think the doctor-patient relationship is a specifically poignant example of the kinds of complexities I have in mind. I have defended my account of epistemic authority specifically in relation to this context in Popowicz (2021).

[6] That being said, my reader may be sceptical that the account can do so much work. For those who prefer to think there are a variety of types of epistemic authority (following Croce (2017) and (2019)), each requiring a different account, I present my view as another type to add to the overall taxonomy. This seems to be the approach that Jäger endorses, referring to my view as a the *doxastic practice approach* to epistemic authority (forthcoming).

The epistemic authority of practice
An agent S is an epistemic authority relative to another agent S* iff:

1. S has the requisite skills, abilities, and know-how to successfully partake in a certain kind of epistemic practice, *EP*, relevant to some domain of inquiry *d*.
2. S has sufficient access to the evidence and resources required for her to properly partake in the *EP* relevant to *d*.
3. S* does not have the skills, abilities, and know-how required to partake in the *EP* relevant to *d*, or at least has them to a (significantly) lesser extent than S.
4. S* recognises that *d* and the relevant *EP* is epistemically valuable for S*, i.e. it pertains to questions that would be valuable to have answers to.
5. S* recognises S as having a sufficient level of the requisite skills, abilities, and know-how to successfully partake in *EP*.
6. (From 4 and 5:) S* recognises that S is, by virtue of her ability to partake in the relevant *EP*, a potential source of some kind of epistemic good that is valuable to S*.
7. S has the power to give S* a preemptive reason to behave in a certain epistemic fashion, by implicitly or explicitly providing higher-order reasons for S* to behave in a certain way relative to the *EP* that is pertinent to *d*. This includes S's being able to authoritatively *tell* S* how one *should* intellectually behave in order to partake in the *EP* relevant to *d*.

In simpler terms, my account suggests the following. When I recognise someone as an epistemic authority, I am recognising them as legitimate practitioners of an epistemic practice relevant to a certain domain of inquiry. I recognise this epistemic practice and domain as ones that I care to engage with because I recognise that (i.) the kinds of questions the domain of inquiry aims to answer are questions I have some interest in getting answers to, and (ii.) I believe that the relevant epistemic practice is one that is sufficiently good at attaining these answers. In recognising someone as an epistemic authority, I am recognising them as some kind of means to access the workings and, most importantly, the product of a certain kind of practice that I have reason to value, and that I do not have the means to engage with directly by my lonesome. For reasons that I will elucidate more clearly shortly, this entails that the epistemic authority has a kind of Preemptive

power over me, either tacitly providing me with a preemptive reason, or even explicitly commanding me to behave in a certain epistemic fashion.

Central to my view is the suggestion that being adequately situated in a certain kind of epistemic practice is what establishes authority. An epistemic practice is a united set of discipline-specific methods that are used by that discipline's practitioners to answer its primary questions. It can, in part, be a stated methodology, a derived set of rules that restrict and motivate the epistemic behaviour of those that engage with it. But it is far more than a mere code of conduct. Such practices are the result of complicated social phenomena, and constituted by the attitudes and behaviours of its practitioners, explicitly or implicitly stated, intentionally and unintentionally acted or expressed.

An epistemic practice is, broadly put, a kind of *social* practice. As Sanford Goldberg has stated, a social practice has an *epistemic* dimension when 'successful participation in the practice requires meeting one or more epistemic conditions'(Goldberg, 2018, 169). These conditions can relate to being appropriately knowledgable, possessing the right evidence, being reliable, having conducted the right kind of inquiry, being sensitive to the right information, etc. (Goldberg, 2018, 169–170). But having an epistemic dimension is not sufficient for being an epistemic practice per se. An *epistemic practice* is a social practice, with epistemic dimensions, in which 'the point of the practice is to attain some epistemic goal' (Goldberg, 2018, 170). This goal does not have to be knowledge or true belief: Goldberg mentions the goals of possessing all available evidence, and having the results of some kind of epistemic assessment, for example. I would here also add that the practices I have in mind may have other goals that are not necessarily epistemic—the practice of medicine has numerous epistemic goals, for instance, such as acquiring knowledge of disease and cure, but it also has some purely practical goal such as improvement of human life, the curing of disease, etc.

Epistemic practices are not simple things, and they include a variety of elements. Because they are social phenomena, I do not think it is possible to distil them to a simple formal system or idealised method. Consider the epistemic practice of medicine. On the one hand, we can identify specific determinations of epistemic behaviour, such as the explicitly stated rules of Evidence-Based Medicine, or EBM.[7] But the practice of medical inquiry is not determined solely by such explicit and purely epistemic considerations. Medical research, the processes of prevention, diagnosis, and prognosis, and so forth, are all restricted by various moral, legal, and political codes of conduct. If part of what it means to be a legiti-

[7]EBM is a stated hierarchy of evidential strength that dictates how medical practitioners should weigh certain kinds of evidence. For a discussion of EBM, its history, and its philosophical underpinnings, see (Howick, 2011).

mate member of this practice, say as a primary care physician, requires being sufficiently up-to-date with the relevant research, then part of the practice also includes the legal powers and professional practices that ensure that one is up-to-date. Epistemic practices are complicated, living, social entities. Their legitimacy requires a sufficient level of consistency, and internal agreement, in which behaviours of an epistemic community are properly justified, praised, criticised, and policed intersubjectively, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The kinds of practices I have in mind are thus in no way abstract nor ideal: they are *real* systems defined by human conduct. Such practices are in some way constituted by the collective actions of its practitioners: the epistemic attitudes, behaviours, and choices of its practitioners determine the form of the practice. This, in turn, explains some of the normative standing that an epistemic authority has. An authority is authoritative precisely because of this constitutive relationship. And it is precisely from here that their power of Preemption comes: when we identify someone as an epistemic authority, we are identifying them as practitioners of an epistemic practice that is valuable to us, and thus we recognise that their epistemic behaviour as something to be emulated, that we *ought* to act as they do, and listen to their commands if we want to legitimately partake in said practice.

The power of Preemption that is established here relates specifically to higher-order rather than first-order issues relative to a certain domain of inquiry. The distinction I have in mind is similar to, but somewhat broader than, Alvin Goldman's demarcation of '*primary*' and '*secondary questions*' in a domain of inquiry (2001, 115). The first-order issues or primary questions in a domain of inquiry concern the matters that the discipline primarily aims to answer, or illuminate. The secondary questions or higher-order issues relative to a domain pertain to the very practice and methodology by which a practitioner goes about answering the primary questions of inquiry. These relate to the nature of the relevant evidence, the strength of the arguments used to support conclusions, the definition and extension of the concepts in use, and so forth.

Having the ability to engage with and answer these secondary questions, either explicitly stated or tacitly expressed in one's behaviour, is reflective of an authority's relevant know-how, the skillset that enables them to be practitioners of the kind of epistemic practice that drives their inquiry and discipline. This particular subset of an authority's overall domain-specific knowledge is essential in differentiating a true authority, in the particular normative sense I have outlined above, from someone who merely possesses a broad collection of true beliefs about the first-order questions of a discipline.[8]

[8]To illustrate, compare the epistemic standings of a trivia junkie who has a vast array of true beliefs about diseases, their signs and symptoms, diagnosis and prognosis, with an actual medical

The power of Preemption as applied to the higher-order questions and issues relevant to a practice, follows from the conditions that establish the non-authority-to-authority relationship. If I recognise someone as an epistemic authority I am identifying them as legitimate practitioners of a legitimate epistemic practice that I cannot directly and autonomously partake in myself. And if this epistemic authority were to tell me, for instance, that my reason for believing that p was a bad reason for making conclusions in the relevant epistemic practice, and I did not preemptively behave in accordance with this information, then I would either be, (i.) suggesting that the authority did not know how to act in accordance with the relevant epistemic practice, thus entailing that I do not recognise them as authorities, or, (ii.) suggesting that they do in fact know how to behave in accordance with the relevant epistemic practice, but that I don't agree with the legitimacy of the practice itself, which would also undermine my identification of the epistemic authority in the first place. On my account, then, a certain kind of Preemption is an unavoidable consequence of identifying someone as meeting the conditions of epistemic authority. There is a constitutive relationship between identifying someone as an epistemic authority per se, and treating them as having this kind of power of Preemption.

Thus, epistemic authorities have the standing to tell others how to behave when engaged in that practice. This could include: telling others what are good or bad reasons for acting in a certain fashion or holding a certain attitude in that practice; telling others what the explicit rules of the practice are, if available; telling others to mimic one's own epistemic behaviour in a certain way; and, more controversially, it may even involve chastising or encouraging certain kinds of epistemic behaviour without necessarily needing to provide an additional reason to the non-authority besides reference to one's authority. Much as when I was learning how to drive a car, and my mother would command me 'Don't do that!' when my behaviour did not match the practice of driving a car safely, an authority's behaviour, attitude, or explicit command is preemptively motivating. I do not need to know anything more than the fact that they are an authority, that they *know how* to epistemically behave relative to the practice in question, in order to take their behaviours, attitudes, or commands as reason enough to behave a certain way myself.[9]

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expert who partakes in the process of answering questions in the medical context. Though we may call a well-versed trivia junkie as an 'expert' in common parlance, there is a large gulf between such individuals and someone who is an actual authority on the matter. Harry Collins and Robert Evans, in their taxonomy of expertise, would distinguish here between having 'beer-mat knowledge' and having 'contributory expertise'(2007).

[9]Important to note here, however, that the fact that my view suggests that an epistemic authority has such a normative standing and power over others does not entail that *any* use of such power is legitimate. Due to the complexities of the relationships and practices in question, there will be many restrictions and limitations on such power, for epistemic, moral, political, practical, legal, and

This kind of view can explain the various kinds of forms a relationship with an epistemic authority may take. To continue with the medical example, consider a case in which I am working with my doctor in order to determine the best course of action in treating a disease I am ill with. This is a complicated case because, even though I am not an expert on medical issues, I am nevertheless directly and indirectly involved in the relevant inquiry: in gathering relevant information, and reaching decisions on interventions and outcomes. Importantly, I have access to relevant evidence a doctor does not. Furthermore, the questions that medical practice aims to answer are of special practical importance to me, and *good* answers to these questions are subjectively tinted: my own values and preferences will determine whether or not a certain option is the best one *for me*, in my situation, given my particular set of preferences, values, and desires. These subjective elements cannot be determined by a doctor without my involvement in the relevant inquiry.[10] First-order Preemption views, and views that identify epistemic authorities solely in terms of the ability to communicate true beliefs, fail to say anything about these kinds of relationship: it would not make sense to suggest that a medical practitioner can authoritatively tell us the answers to the relevant first-order questions in such cases.[11]

By identifying an epistemic authority as a means by which a non-authority can engage in a certain kind of epistemic practice, my view explains how such relationships can function. On my view, a patient can be involved in the relevant practice under the guidance of an epistemic authority: they have duties in that practice, such as identifying their symptoms and stating their preferences and values. The epistemic authority's role is to properly weigh this input and utilise it as determined by said practice. An authority can tell me what is and is not relevant evidence, how much certain pieces of information should be weighed in the overall decision-making process, correct us when we don't reason appropriately relative to the practice, etc. Such epistemic authorities can be understood as *guides* in our inquiries.[12]

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a wide variety of other reasons. The point is just that, in terms of having a certain kind of epistemic standing relative to an epistemic practice, they do have this power. Other conditions can be stipulated to determine if and how such power should be legitimately used.

[10] One way to show this is to recognise that the relevant questions to be answered in these cases are not broad ones such as 'What is the cure for disease x?', but rather specific and individualised ones such as 'What is the right course of medical action for patient A with disease x, given all the medical evidence e and the set of A's values and preferences v?'.

[11] Imagine a doctor unequivocally telling us that we *ought* to go through multiple rounds of chemotherapy to prolong our lives, completely disregarding our own preferences. Arguably, they would completely fail to understand the nature of the kinds of inquiry they are engaged with, and would not be working to answer the primary question that we expect them to.

[12] For a much more thorough explication of the medical example of epistemic authority, see

In the same way, my view can also make sense of the ways in which an epistemic authority may lead someone to understanding rather than true belief, and, more broadly, can act as an authority in a pedagogical context. To educate is not to instil mere belief: to teach is to directly and indirectly modify another agent's cognitive behaviour. An epistemic authority *qua* educator can preemptively tell us not to reason a certain way, to approach inquiry with one strategy rather than another, and so forth. They show us what kind of epistemic behaviour to immitate. This can all be made sense of if we think of epistemic authority primarily in terms of the higher-order powers I have suggested.

I also think that my Preemptive view avoids some of the pitfalls of first-order Preemption views such as Zagzebski's. First, it does not suggest that an authority can preemptively alienate our beliefs from our reasons, given that my account suggests that an authority acts on our reasons, not our first-order beliefs directly. An authority has the normative power to change what reasons we have, how they are utilised, and how we go about gaining more evidence, etc. As I have been suggesting, my modifying my epistemic behaviour in this way is rationally required on the basis of having identified an authority as an authority. This process, I take it, can thus actually put me in a better position epistemically, where my reasons and beliefs are better matched: I have, in the process of emulating an epistemic practice, come to restructure my cognitive landscape, beginning to think as a practitioner.

Non-authorities are of course also responsible for their own epistemic engagement to a degree. Unlike other views, mine does not suggest that a non-authority can simply unload their own epistemic responsibilities when engaging with any kind of specialised inquiry and deferring to an authority. Given the contours of the epistemic asymmetry that is constitutive of the relevant relationship, there is much that a non-authority must do. In rationally engaging with a certain epistemic authority and epistemic practice, I must have done my due diligence: there are reasons for choosing certain kinds of epistemic practices over others, and one can be reasonably criticised for not choosing appropriately or with the right kind of (non-domain-specific) evidence, argumentative support, or justification. We cannot expect these decisions to always be made on the basis of the deepest philosophical reasons, but some kind of minimum, reasonable threshold of consideration will have to be passed.[13] But non-authorities must also have the intellectual awareness

(Popowicz, 2021).

[13] In some cases, if I am not particularly well versed in the critical analysis of epistemic methods, I may have to rely on something simple, like a practice's track record. I think the fact that we are not always in the best position to evaluate such practices, as members of society, is not reflective of such a standard being too high a bar, but the need for a broader, dare I say it, philosophical education that provides members of society with the means to properly interrogate, critically evaluate, and appreciate the epistemic practices that are the engine of human, intellectual progress.

to not assume they know what is and is not a good reason or piece of evidence in the relevant inquiry. If they are patients in a collaborative process of inquiry as already discussed, for example, they have the responsibility to share all information that may be relevant, where relevance is determined by the epistemic authority, not themselves. They must involve themselves in the practice to the extent that is possible, ask questions where necessary to properly situate themselves in the relevant epistemic method, and ensure that they are participating responsibly throughout. In other contexts, when a non-authority discovers that a certain authority believes that p, and p is completely at odds with their own prior evidence and reasoning, it will be their responsibility to take the steps to seek further understanding, and to engage with the higher-order issues that will enable them to appropriately tend to their cognitive landscapes.

Practices, not persons

My account properly locates the locus of the authority of a belief or some other epistemically relevant behaviour or attitude, not in an individual's knowledge or cognitive skills, but in the relevant epistemic practice of which they are practitioners. On this view, individuals are the mere conduits of epistemic-good-producing systems.

We tend to speak of *individuals* as having epistemic authority, rather than a practice, for a few trivial reasons: first, individual persons can have agency, possess beliefs, communicate with us, and, furthermore, command us, whereas practices cannot; secondly, given the asymmetrical epistemic positions of individuals under consideration, relative to a certain epistemic practice, we are by hypothesis considering instances in which individuals do not have expertise of their own to 'communicate' or engage directly with the practice themselves, and thus we focus on the individuals that can, as these are the ones that we directly engage with. In the direct sense of accounting for a real social phenomena, epistemic authority as exemplified by an individual may seem more fundamental (as Jäger suggests (forthcoming)). But in the deeper justificatory and normative sense, the practice itself is the more fundamental sense of authority relevant here.

Separating the individual *qua* expert or authority from the authority of the practice itself, I would argue, neatly demarcates the roles of all epistemic agents involved.[14] By distinguishing between the two, we recognise the complexities of our

[14]Of course, when individuals constitute, in part, the practice and the practice, in turn, legitimises the status of the individual practitioners, one cannot definitively separate the two, but my point is to simply be clear about where the source of the legitimacy is: in the broader social and epistemic practice, not in the skills of the individual per se

social-epistemic position, and more clearly illuminate what is involved in attempting to identify the proper targets of our deferential attitudes.

Individuals are notoriously fallible, biased, and riddled with all sorts of cognitive limitations. Practices, the result of collaborative processes, when properly formed, can circumvent many such issues.[15] Precisely for this reason, we ought to be suspicious of thinking of the notion of epistemic authority in the strictly individualist and atomistic sense other accounts focus on. To speak somewhat loosely: when I engage with an epistemic authority it is not because I think they are the generative source of knowledge, or other epistemic goods, as wise sages who have a special ability to 'see' the truth. It would be more apt to say that I engage with an epistemic authority as an indirect means of participating in the epistemic practice itself, the broader social phenomenon that exists as a result of a community of experts working in a legitimate and unified fashion. I am really looking for an answer to the question 'What does the *practice* "think" and "see"?', not 'What does Dr. Lopez think and see?', though this is of course linguistically odd to state so directly.

Being clear on this can help us avoid some of the pitfalls of contemporary, epistemic life. Take, for instance, the common phenomenon of thinking that, just because someone is an expert or sufficiently knowledgeable and talented in one field, that we ought to listen to them as being somewhat authoritative about other matters. We might call this the mistake of *epistemic idolising*.[16] If a well-known and respected political scientist tells me something about how to best treat depression, I would be making a serious mistake to treat that opinion with the same authority as I would her proclamations about public attitudes towards the current president of the United States. Epistemic idolising happens because we place too much stock in an individual human being and their cognitive capabilities, identifying them, rather than the social practices that they work as a part of, as the locus of epistemic goodness. This is to fail to recognise the true basis of epistemic justification: if there were no such practices, the epistemic authority's conclusions would not be appropriately justified or legitimate.

Conversely, the same mistake is made, too, when an expert in one field falsely thinks of themselves as authoritative in another, on the basis of having epistemic superiority in one domain of inquiry. Such individuals may unjustifiably speak about other domains of inquiry determined by other epistemic practices. This would be, to use Nathan Ballantyne's terminology, a case of *epistemic trespassing* (Ballantyne, 2019).

[15] The wide practice of peer review in a diverse range of epistemic practices is a clear example.

[16] Not to be confused with the altogether different notion of epistemic idolatry defended by Josh Dolin (2022).

Of course, the notion of an epistemic practice, as I have discussed it here, leads to its own set of concerns and worries. Practices can be fallible, too. As I have already noted, real, existing epistemic practices are not always formed or modified due to some explicitly rational and philosophical decision-making process. Practices take shape and can change for all sorts of reasons, including for ethical, political, and legal reasons. This may sometimes give us reason to be sceptical of their legitimacy as, specifically, *epistemic* practices in some cases. Because the most important epistemic practices we engage with are rife with non-epistemic elements, restrictions, and motivations, they are often far removed from some ideal, epistemic system that I may be able to envision in the abstract. This is part of what it is to live in a non-ideal world.

One may be sceptical that there can be any such thing as epistemic authority outside of the idealised case, because one doubts the trustworthiness of individuals and practices alike. By showing how authority is grounded in a social practice, however, the account of epistemic authority I have outlined here has the advantage of clearly articulating both *why* one may be sceptical of the existence of such authority, but also *how* we can, as a society, make changes in order to establish the kinds of social-epistemic relationships the account illustrates as possible.

Because the kinds of practices authority are grounded on are complex and social ones, not just idealised and abstract rational systems, there are a plethora of issues that may lead us to recognise them as untrustworthy. If I discover that a certain practice, contrary to its stated epistemic methodology, is plagued with issues that put it into question, I may recognise that it fails to live up to its ideal, choosing either to: not engage with it, or treat its conclusions with diminished worth. If, for example, I discover that nutrition scientists have been paid by the sugar industry to blame certain kinds of fats rather than sugar for certain health-related outcomes, I may be sceptical of that practice, regardless of the legitimacy of its stated methodology and means of avoiding financial bias and conflict. I may also recognise that a certain practice is specifically untrustworthy for certain individuals. Knowing that the medical field tends to dismiss the input of women and people of colour, a woman of colour may have little reason to treat it in the authoritative sense that I have discussed here. This suggests an interesting outcome: the very same epistemic practice may be valuable and authoritative to one individual whereas it is not for another, even when they have the same values, preferences, or appreciation for a certain kind of rational method, etc. My view has the benefit of clearly revealing why this is the case, by articulating the social complexity of the practice that grounds authority, rather than grounding it merely on the fact that one individual is more knowledgeable than another, and suggesting that all individuals that lack such knowledge should treat experts as authorities.

Nevertheless, one must recognise that, as with most philosophising, the ac-

count I have provided is idealised: it takes as its exemplar the possibility of a social-epistemic practice as bereft of the kinds of issues just referenced. But I take this kind of idealisation to be productive precisely because it takes into consideration the full complexity of our social-epistemic lives, presenting an ideal that is grounded in plausible reality, rather than an ideal goal that cannot possibly apply to creatures of our kind, living in the kind of social spaces that we do. It suggests that epistemic authority can make sense if social practices are appropriately assessed, monitored, and regulated, and it shows, via the constitutive relationship between practitioner and practice, how the actions of the individual can either improve or degrade the very practice in question.

Importantly, for individuals seeking knowledge from others, it shows how our epistemic position is socially situated, sourced from a complex social environment, sensitive to our backgrounds, perspectives, and identities. It does not go so far as to relativise our knowledge, but shows us why what may be an epistemically authoritative practice for one is not for another, or why certain social issues will make knowledge harder or easier to attain depending on who one is. Such consideration of the epistemic authority of practice could further illuminate the existence and nature of what Miranda Fricker refers to as *epistemic injustice* (2007).

The strength of any philosophical consideration for or against engagement with a certain epistemic practice, or for or against changing one such practice, comes only from the arguments and reasons presented in favour of it. These reasons are philosophical and empirical in nature: relating both to the value of a rational method, but also to the empirical reality of how that method is manifested in a social practice, in all its complexity. Our role as 'philosophers' of all stripes (whether we are sociologists, political theorists, scientists, etc.) is to attempt, as best as one can, to step outside of the current systems of human knowledge acquisition, and hypothesise as to what is and is not the best way to engage in that practice more broadly speaking, with consideration for factors epistemic, ethical, and practical. One refers to track records, and learns from the mistakes of previous social orders and systems. One attempts to imagine ideal epistemic practices, and to take steps to approximate these in reality. In this way we are all part of a broader, rational practice of evaluating epistemic practices. Can one be authoritative over such a practice in the way that I have outlined above? Are we, *qua* philosophers, authorities on the matter? I don't see how this can be the case. The nature of such inquiry is essentially removed from a clearly demarcated and homogenous practice, so there is nothing to be authoritative over in the sense articulated above. Furthermore, given the empirical nature of study of epistemic practices, much more than philosophical rationalising is required. And yet, when we philosophise, we try to look at the authorities and their practices from a suitably elevated vantage point, and scrutinise their games from without.

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