Deference to Experts
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Especially but not exclusively in the United States, there is a significant gulf between expert opinion and public opinion on a range of important political, social, and scientific issues. Large numbers of lay people hold views contrary to the expert consensus on topics such as climate change, vaccines, and economics. Much political commentary assumes that ordinary people *should* defer to experts more than they do, and this view is certainly lent force by the literally deadly effects of many denials of established science. But there are complex philosophical issues here, concerning, among other things, (i) what an expert is; (ii) *what kind* of deference is called for; (iii) and *when* deference is called for. This entry gives an overview of these three issues and recent work on them. It then examines some potential collective and pragmatic disadvantages of deference, before concluding with reflections on what we can say to those who distrust experts.

1. What is an expert?

First, whether and when we ought to defer to experts plausibly depends on what we mean by an 'expert'. Here we can contrast two different conceptions of expertise (cf. Almassi 2017: 134-135). On the first, which we might call the **status conception** of expertise, an expert with regard to some subject is just anyone who is *publicly accorded status* as a privileged authority with regard to that subject. On the second, which we might call the **reliability conception** of expertise, it takes more to count as a genuine expert: an expert about some particular subject matter is someone who *actually has a reliable track record* of being right about questions about that subject matter, in their public pronouncements.

Unfortunately, both conceptions of expertise create certain problems for the advice to (always) defer to experts. First, there can sometimes be genuinely good reasons not to trust the testimony of those accorded the *status* of an expert. Someone can be elevated to the status of an expert despite being quite misinformed or unreliable. It would also be naïve to think that people accorded the status of experts are never biased by their political orientations, interests, or incentives in their research field (such as what receives grant funding). Finally, some people accorded the status of experts may deliberately lie. Insofar as we can have evidence of these various phenomena obtaining, we can have reasons not to defer to those accorded the status of experts.

On the reliability conception of expertise, by contrast, the advice to defer to experts seems much sounder. However, this conception of expertise makes the task of identifying experts much harder to undertake. As both Elijah Millgram (2015: ch. 1, appendix A) and Thi Nguyen (2020) argue, it's hard to identify reliable experts without already being an expert oneself. To know whether someone has a reliable track record, you need to be able to check whether the things that they have

previously said have turned out to be true. But that requires some *independent* way of knowing the truth about the matters she has pronounced on, separate from her own testimony. But if you already have this independent way of knowing the truth, you are in effect already an expert yourself, and have no (or at least, less) need to defer to experts.

By contrast, Elizabeth Anderson (2014) argues that it is "easy" for lay people to identify trustworthy experts with respect to, for example, climate change. Yet the criteria on which Anderson says that such identifications can be made are largely status-based, and it's not clear how mere *status* as expert will command deference from those who believe that the institutions of science are biased toward researchers who affirm the existence of climate change, and thus that such status does not establish trustworthiness or reliability (see section 5 below). Thus, we see a dilemma between the status and the reliability conceptions of expertise: the former makes expertise easy to identify, but means that deference-worthiness will not automatically follow from expertise; whereas the latter does make deference-worthiness pretty much automatically follow from expertise, but makes expertise very difficult to identify.

Both the status conception and the reliability conception of expertise, then, create problems for the advice to defer to experts: the former makes it *bad* advice, at least applied across the board; whereas the latter makes it advice that is *very hard to follow*. Future work should address whether there is some third, better conception of expertise to plug into the slogan that we should defer to experts. Perhaps we can pursue a compromise conception: for example, perhaps we should treat someone as an expert whenever they are publicly accorded the status of expert *and* we lack strong positive reasons to think that they are nevertheless unreliable.

2. What kind of deference to experts is required?

Assuming we can find some conception of expertise that steers between the respective problems of the status and reliability conceptions, it remains to ask what *kind* of deference to such experts is required. It seems hard to deny that we should give the testimony of genuine experts at least *significant* weight in our deliberations about what to believe. Some early advocates of deference to experts (e.g. Hardwig 1985) presented this thought as amounting to a requirement to believe things, on experts' say-so, without having any evidence for them oneself. But recent work has moved away from this contention, which seems to rely on an unnecessarily restrictive notion of evidence. On a less restrictive (and more normatively relevant) notion of evidence, the fact that a reliable testifier says that p is itself evidence for p in a perfectly good sense. So of course the fact that an expert says that p should, *ceteris paribus*, make one more confident in p.

Some philosophers (e.g. Huemer 2005; Zagzebski 2012: ch. 5; Grundmann 2021) have made a more controversial claim, namely that, when it comes to matters on which one lacks expertise and there are identifiable experts, one should set aside one's own judgment entirely, and quasi-automatically believe whatever the experts say. Call this the "strong view." Huemer provocatively presents this view as an injunction to defer to experts *rather than* engaging in critical thinking: on his view, ordinary people should not even try to evaluate the first-order evidence and arguments bearing on issues of public dispute for themselves, rather just taking whatever the experts say as dispositive.

This can be thought of as a kind of abdication of "epistemic autonomy," where epistemic autonomy involves evaluating the first-order arguments and evidence for oneself (cf. Fricker 2006). Zagzebski, meanwhile, situates the view within Joseph Raz's (1988) framework of "preemptive reasons," whereby a preemptive reason is one that replaces or "screens off" one's other reasons. The idea is that the fact that the experts say that *p* screens off whatever other reasons one might have for or against believing *p*.

What could justify this strong view, whereby in the face of expert testimony for *p*, the rest of one's evidence for or against *p* should get *no* weight? The typical way of arguing for the strong view appeals to the fact that we'll likely fare better, from the point of view of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones, if we wholly defer to the experts than if we try to weigh expert testimony alongside our other evidence. When we try to do this, we inevitably process our other evidence via our own assessments of that evidence. But our own assessments of the evidence are likely to be much less reliable than those of experts, since they have background knowledge and skill that enables them to assess the evidence more reliably than we can. Thus (it's argued), at the very least, expert testimony should receive *considerably more* weight in one's deliberations than one's own assessment of the evidence. Now, perhaps a *perfectly ideal* epistemic agent would be able to give the expert testimony *a lot* of weight, while still giving their own assessment of the evidence just a *little* bit of weight alongside it. But we know we are not totally ideal believers, and we know that we are vulnerable to overconfidence in our own judgments in various ways (cf. Ahlstrom-Vij 2013). So it may be simpler and better for us to simply abdicate epistemic autonomy altogether, especially if in the difference between this and giving our own assessments a *little* bit of weight is, in practice, not big. The abdication of epistemic autonomy may be the best *feasible* strategy for us as limited agents. Thus, at least if we are doing "non-ideal" epistemology, we should favor abdication.

In response, Jennifer Lackey (2018) makes a number of objections to the strong view. Perhaps the most forceful is her charge that this view will give the wrong result when the content of expert testimony is obviously absurd. If there's room for us to challenge expert testimony when it's obviously absurd, this suggests that expert testimony shouldn't just be "preempting" or "screening off" the other reasons for belief that we have, and that there should still be some role for our own evaluations of the evidence to play. If this is right, the strong view cannot be true in full generality. However, there may still be *some* circumstances in which abdicating epistemic autonomy is the only epistemically responsible strategy. This leads to the question of *when* deference is called for.

3. When is deference called for?

(i) Deference to individual experts vs. deference to expert consensus

First, Lackey's objections to the strong view plausibly have more force in the context of a *single* expert than in the context of a *wide-ranging expert (near-) consensus*. It is quite hard to imagine a situation where the overwhelming majority of (genuine!) experts testify to something obviously absurd, and to the extent that we can imagine such a situation, it's not obvious that one should not defer. Scientific truths

can be very counter-intuitive, and if there is an expert consensus in favor of such a claim, I might be required to just automatically trust this scientific consensus no matter how absurd it seems to me.

This raises broader issues about what to do under conditions where there are many experts. While it's possible for there to be just one expert opinion (or just one such opinion that one is aware of), this is not the normal case. The more common cases are those whereby one is either aware of a general expert consensus, or whereby one is aware of extensive disagreement among the experts with no clear consensus.

In general, one would expect the epistemic weight that an expert opinion should carry to increase, *ceteris paribus*, the larger the number of experts who hold it. This is perhaps a slight simplification, since, as Alvin Goldman (2001) points out, the expert opinions might not be independent of each other, and if two sources exhibit *no* independence – if one is an "undiscriminating reflector" of the other – then the former adds no evidential weight above and above that provided by the latter. However, as Lackey (2013) points out, it's not very plausible that different experts exhibit *no* independence: at the very least, experts do *some* checking of each others' work, and make assessments that inform decisions whether to retransmit each others' views. And as long as there's *some* independence between sources, the evidential weight of the two combined is greater than that of each taken individually. So the case for deference is stronger, ceteris paribus, as the expert consensus in favor of a view grows.

What about the case where there is no clear expert consensus? Obviously, it won't do to simply pick some subset of the (genuine) experts to defer to in such a case, perhaps on the basis of which set of experts holds the view that one antecedently wants to arrive at: this seems like a clear case of motivated reasoning. One might try to determine which experts are more trustworthy, and Goldman (2001) supplies some criteria for doing this. But assuming we're working with a definition of experts whereby those we have good reasons to distrust don't count as experts in the first place, cases of widespread disagreement between genuine experts are likely to be ones in which we cannot determine which experts are right.

Importantly, however, this does not necessarily mean that we should simply revert to using our own autonomous judgment to form a belief on the matter about which the experts disagree. Indeed, Huemer (2005) gives a powerful rationale against doing this. If the experts haven't been able to reach a consensus about some question, that suggests that figuring out the truth about this question, given the evidence currently available, is very hard. But then, Huemer thinks, you should be *even more* doubtful that you could figure out the truth for yourself, based on your own assessments of the evidence. Put another way: if the experts (as a collective) haven't managed to do it, isn't it extraordinarily hubristic to think that you can? Huemer thus concludes that in cases of widespread expert disagreement, ordinary people should suspend judgment.

(ii)   Deference when you are outright incompetent

Another set of cases in which the strong view may be plausible are those where the lay person is outright incompetent – not merely *less* competent than the expert – to assess the first-order evidence and arguments bearing on some issue. In such cases, there is some force to the strong view's injunction

4

not to even try to do this. For example, consider lay people who try to look at climate data for themselves, without the technical training required to make sense of it, and figure out "for themselves" whether human activity is contributing to climate change. Regardless of whether such people ultimately arrive at the correct answer, they seem to be making a procedural mistake in trying to evaluate the data for themselves. Below some threshold of competence, including your own judgment in your overall calculus is only likely to distort matters or make things worse.

Moreover, it seems that the refusal to evaluate evidence that you're not competent to evaluate doesn't amount to irrationally ignoring part of your total evidence. Plausibly, you are *not* rationally required to draw conclusions on the basis of evidence that you are incompetent to evaluate, even if there's a sense in which you "have" this evidence and a sense in which it "supports" certain conclusions. If this is the situation we're in with respect to complex scientific data, then the expert consensus may sometimes be the *only* evidence that we are able to responsibly take into account. So these cases seem like ones where a particularly strong kind of deference is called for.

(iii)   *Descriptive vs. normative deference*

Finally, whether deference is required of us may depend on whether the issue at hand is descriptive or normative. There has been extensive debate about moral deference in particular. This debate largely takes for granted that some deference about descriptive is required or at least permitted, and asks whether matters are different with moral deference, and if so why. (The question here is about *pure* moral deference – deference not about the descriptive questions that *inform* moral judgment, but about whatever moral questions remain *even once all the descriptive facts are settled*.) Those who think that moral deference is generally not required or even permissible include Driver (2006), McGrath (2009), and Hills (2009); those who think moral deference can be permissible or even required include Sliwa (2012), Enoch (2014), and Wiland (2017). A further issue in the background is whether there even *are* any moral experts. If not, then deference to moral experts won't be required for the simple reason that there aren't any. Since political judgment depends not just on descriptive considerations but on "pure" moral and (perhaps) other normative considerations, similar issues arise with respect to the normative questions that inform political judgment (but cf. Lillehammer 2021 on some potential differences).

We cannot settle these issues here, but note that even if there can in principle be moral (or, more broadly, normative) experts, they won't always be the same people who are experts on related descriptive questions. An economic expert on what policies maximize GDP does not have special expertise on the moral/political question of whether GDP (as opposed to, say, income equality) is what ought to be maximized. A climate scientist does not have special expertise on thorny moral questions about obligations to future generations. And an epidemiologist expert on how the COVID-19 virus spreads does not have special expertise on the question of how the risk of contracting the virus is to be balanced against the mental health risks of having very little social contact with others, or the risks of disruption to a child's education. When such experts claim special authority with respect to these normative questions, they engage in what Nathan Ballantyne (2019) calls "epistemic trespassing," treating themselves as experts about matters outside their genuine field of expertise. They

also risk fueling resentment and distrust of experts by seeming to preach about questions of value. Insofar as public discourse often doesn't distinguish expertise about empirical questions from expertise about closely related normative questions, or the idea that we should defer about the former from the idea that we should defer about the latter, it is too coarse.

4. Collective and pragmatic disadvantages of deference

As we've seen, there's a strong epistemic case at least for giving significant weight to the testimony of experts, and perhaps in some cases for outright abdicating epistemic autonomy altogether. However, there are a range of concerns one might have about a society characterized by very widespread automatic or quasi-automatic deference to experts.

First, there are various ways in which such a society might be epistemically worse-off in the long-run. Following J.S. Mill's discussion in *On Liberty* (1859: ch. 2), many philosophers have argued that we collectively do better at reaching truth and knowledge when there are people willing to challenge existing consensus opinion: this creates the conditions for robust disagreement that ensures the interrogation of received ideas. History is littered with once-consensus views that were ultimately shown to be false when challenged in this way. Relatedly, the benefits of the "wisdom of the crowd" demonstrated by the Condorcet Jury Theorem – roughly, the result that when individuals are each better than chance at determining the truth, the probability that the majority will identify the truth approaches 1 as the group gets larger – are realized only when there is a suitable degree of independence between different individuals, which requires them not to simply defer to one another (Landemore 2012: ch. 6; Hazlett 2016: 134-141). Moreover, individuals who defer may thereby miss out on the opportunity to develop their critical thinking capacities. This risks creating a vicious cycle whereby the very condition that requires them to defer – their inability to reliably determine the truth when thinking for themselves – is perpetuated by that deference.

These (possible) disadvantages of deference are epistemic in the broad sense that they have to do with the capacity of individuals and collectives to reach knowledge and true belief, in the long-run. However, even supposing that widespread deference results in long-run epistemic disadvantages, it is debatable whether this fact makes it epistemically rational for an individual to refuse to defer on any given occasion. This follows only on the controversial assumption of "epistemic consequentialism," according to which what one ought or is rational to believe depends on the epistemic consequences of doing so (Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn 2018). Critics of consequentialism (e.g. Berker 2013) hold that the long-run epistemic consequences of believing something can come apart from whether one has sufficient evidence for it, and that when they do so, it's the latter and not the former that determines the rationality of the belief. Moreover, some of the epistemic disadvantages of deference, like a lack of robust public debate, only emerge when *many* people defer, and even on a consequentialist picture, it's controversial whether this is relevant to whether a *single individual* should defer, assuming their practices will not cause many others to follow suit. Nevertheless, the long-run epistemic disadvantages of deference might give us pause when publicly propounding epistemic norms of deference.

Other potential concerns about norms of deference are more explicitly political in flavor. One such worry is that, since expertise about many topics tends to correlate with education levels, and

6

since educational opportunities are unequally distributed across race and class groupings, a norm of deferring to experts will often in practice amount to instructing the marginalized not to think for themselves, and instead to defer to the privileged. This seems both morally and epistemically problematic (cf. Landemore 2012: ch. 4; Dular 2017), and may contribute to what Kristie Dotson (2014) calls "epistemic oppression," which she defines as "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production." Matters are not simple here, since it's a theme of "standpoint epistemology" that the marginalized should in fact count as experts pertaining to matters concerning their own oppression, such that a norm of deference to experts would instruct the privileged to defer to *them* (see e.g. Saint-Croix 2020). But there will still be many issues about which it's hard to attain expert status without the kind of educational opportunities to which many marginalized people lack access.

Finally, some have held that there is something imperfectly democratic about a society where citizens defer to technocratic experts. For example, Han Van Wietmarschen (2019) holds that (some) political deference conflicts both with the ideal of reciprocity, according to which citizens should make political decisions based on considerations that are justifiable to all other citizens, and with the ideal of equal opportunity of political influence, according to which all citizens should have equal opportunity to influence the outcome of the political process. Compare a society in which a totalitarian state has genuinely managed to convince all its citizens of the wisdom and justice of everything it does. In such a society, there could be free and fair elections in which citizens vote according to their genuine beliefs. Yet there's a sense in which such beliefs wouldn't reflect preferences and values that are authentically the citizens' own. As such, this society seems to fall short of democratic ideals. Arguably, the same is true of a society in which everyone automatically defers to experts (cf. Hazlett 2016: 141-146).

5. Distrust of (actual) experts

We started by noting the gulf between expert and public opinion on a range of issues of public concern. One source of this gulf is individuals' subscribing to anti-deference norms according to which they ought to "think for themselves." But a different source is individuals' *distrusting* experts – doubting whether the (purported) experts really are reliable. Such distrust cannot be addressed by repeating that we ought to defer to these experts because they are more reliable than us – for this is exactly what is doubted. Moreover, people sometimes have sophisticated rationales for not trusting the purported experts: they think they are biased by political orientation or professional and financial incentives in their fields, or prone to groupthink. Even if these theories are false and the experts *are* in fact reliable, it doesn't follow that those who doubt this are being irrational. For the truth about who is reliable is not always rationally transparent. The question then arises: what, if anything, can we say to someone who distrusts the experts about issues like climate change or vaccines? Is there anything we can say that at least *rationally ought* to change their mind?

Perhaps surprisingly, some philosophers writing about expertise seem to tacitly assume a kind of epistemic subjectivism, according to which merely *regarding* someone as untrustworthy suffices for having normative reasons not to believe their testimony – and conversely, regarding them as

trustworthy suffices for having normative reasons to believe it (Almassi 2012: 41; Rini 2017: E49-E54). But this subjectivism is tendentious: arguably, in order to be reasonable in disregarding someone's testimony, one must not merely *regard* them as untrustworthy, but have good *reasons* to do so. Merely having a theory according to which all the experts are biased or engaged in conspiracy won't suffice for rationally refusing to defer to them; one must have good evidence for that theory.

That said, it's very hard to affirmatively prove that the experts *are* reliable and trustworthy. As already noted, it would be naïve to insist that scientists are *never* affected by bias or by professional or financial incentives. Such influences *do* sometimes manifest, and those appealing to them can't just be written off as conspiracy theorists. Moreover, as we've also already seen, directly checking an expert's track record for oneself often requires already having the expertise that a lay person, by hypothesis, lacks. One way to get someone to trust an expert might be to appeal to some *other* person whom they already trust, who in turn trusts the expert. But this option is often not available. One feature of what's often called our current "epistemic crisis" involves different social groups living in different epistemic "worlds," with almost no overlap in the sources they trust. When this happens, any attempt to establish the credibility of one source by appeal to another is likely to fail (cf. Lynch 2020).

Perhaps we can suggest that the hypotheses required to make sense of the vast majority of experts being wrong about (say) climate change are simply too *complicated* to warrant much credence. Moreover, we can point to the fact that many who deny the reality of human-made climate change have motives and interests and incentives that are considerably *more* suspicious than those who affirm it. We can also suggest that those who are suspicious of some purported expert sources should bring the same critical eye to the sources they are more inclined to trust. But these are just initial suggestions. And even if they suffice philosophically, that isn't to say they'll be persuasive to those who distrust experts. As such, we need both more philosophical work on the conditions for rationally trusting or distrusting (purported) experts, and more social-scientific work on how to persuade people to do so.[1]

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