

# SCEPTICAL THOUGHTS ON PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERTISE

Jimmy Alfonso LICON

ABSTRACT: My topic is two-fold: a reductive account of expertise as an epistemic phenomenon, and applying the reductive account to the question of whether or not philosophers enjoy expertise. I conclude, on the basis of the reductive account, that even though philosophers enjoy something akin to second-order expertise (i.e. they are often experts on the positions of other philosophers, current trends in the philosophical literature, the history of philosophy, conceptual analysis and so on), they nevertheless lack first-order philosophical expertise (i.e. expertise on philosophical positions themselves such as the nature of mind, causality, normativity and so forth). Throughout the paper, I respond to potential objections.

KEYWORDS: expertise, philosophical methodology, reliability, dissensus

## 1

Although there is a great of talk about expertise in the epistemology of disagreement,<sup>1</sup> there is little, if any, discussion on the nature of expertise; e.g. discussion of the ascription conditions of expertise to others. In this paper, I defend a reductive analysis of expertise as the most plausible account available, along with its (sceptical) implications for philosophical practice – I argue that although philosophers might enjoy something akin to expertise of some kind or other (e.g. they are good at critical thinking, fine-grained distinctions, issues in the history of philosophy and so forth), it is implausible, at least based on the available evidence, that they have the same kind of expertise as scientists, for instance. Throughout the paper, I defend my account of expertise, and its consequences, against potential objections.

## 2

Surely, we believe that there are individuals who are rightly considered experts; e.g. individuals from engineers, scientists and mathematicians are experts in their

---

<sup>1</sup> See: John Beatty, "Masking Disagreement among Experts," *Episteme* 3, 1-2 (2006): 52-67; Michael Bergmann, "Rational Disagreement after Full Disclosure," *Episteme* 6, 3 (2009): 336-353; Earl Conee, "Peerage," *Episteme* 6, 3 (2009): 313-323; Axel Gelfert, "Who is an Epistemic Peer?" *Logos and Episteme* 2, 4 (2011): 507-514; Alvin Goldman, "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63,1 (2011): 85-110.

respective fields. Put differently, we think that there are some people, as opposed to others, who enjoy a privileged epistemic position with regard to a particular body of knowledge. This raises two related issues: (a) specifying the plausible necessary conditions, by and large, of expertise and a method for sorting experts and non-experts and (b) if we can know whether we accurately ascribed expertise to someone.

In the next couple of sections, I discuss each of these issues in turn.

It is tempting to think that expertise is cashed out exclusively in terms of privileged access to knowing-that;<sup>2</sup> i.e. someone is an expert just in case they know more about their respective subject than most others in their peer group. For instance, someone with a photographic memory, might be able to read a series of books on medicine, chemistry, biology and so forth and, as a result, gain a great deal of apparent expertise necessary to serve as a medical doctor. Under the proposed account of expertise, such an individual would count as an expert.

With the example in mind, consider the following (preliminary) account of expertise:

- (1a) S is an expert with regard to X just in case, *ceteris paribus*, S is more likely to have true, justified beliefs with regard to X than the majority of her peer group.

The account of expertise specified by (1a) can be broken into two separate components: (1a') S is an expert with regard to X just in case X tends to form reliable opinions with regard to X; call this *the reliability condition*. Next, (1a'') S is an expert with regard to X just in case X tends, proportionately speaking, to be more reliable in her beliefs with respect to X than the majority of those in her peer group; call this *the scarcity condition*.

Although the reliability and scarcity conditions are plausible necessary conditions of expertise – that is, we tend to think that experts should be reliable in their opinions and in the minority epistemically speaking, i.e. for the most part, if everyone is nearly as good at knowing X, then knowing X is not a sign of expertise (e.g. generally speaking, we are not experts on what it is a like to be in pain) – there is something missing from (1a) in its characterization of what is it to be an

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Jeremy Fantl, “Knowing-How and Knowing-That,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, 3 (2008): 451-470; Stephen Hetherington, “Knowing-That, Knowing-How, and Knowing Philosophically,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 77, 1 (2008): 307-324; Paul Snowdon, “Knowing how and knowing that: A distinction reconsidered,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104, 1 (2003): 1-29; and, of course: Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, “Knowing How,” *Journal of Philosophy* 98, 8 (2001): 411-444. For the sake of this paper, I respect the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that.

expert. Perhaps the following example will better illuminate the relevant intuition.

Suppose that Bob studied everything about medicine that he could get his hands on; he read extensively on biochemistry, human anatomy, pharmacology and other relevant scientific topics. As a result of his extensive learning, the government hired Bob as part of their medic training program in the armed forces. For the first couple of months, Bob was excellent: as medical situations arose, he was easily, and quickly, able to identify them and explain all of the relevant facts of the case. Unfortunately, as time passed, Bob encountered a greater number of situations without knowing how to deal with them; especially if the cases he tackled were not explicitly mentioned in the medical texts he consulted.

Surely, in light of the complications encountered by Bob, he is not really an expert on medicine, even if he enjoyed some components of expertise such as exhaustive knowledge-that. The Bob thought experiment suggests the following, *improved*, account of expertise:

- (1b) S is an expert with regard to X just in case, *ceteris paribus*, (i) S is more likely to have true, justified beliefs with regard to X than most of those in her peer group and (ii) S is more likely to know the relevant heuristics and methods for applying his true, justified beliefs with regard to X.

The addition to our account of expertise is based on the following intuition: an expert with regard to X should be able to, at least to a greater degree than his non-expert peers, improvise solutions to novel problems related to X. Surely, experts should be better equipped, than their non-expert peers, to handle novel problems relating to their field of expertise. Put differently, an expert in X should have methods and heuristics to able to apply to novel situations that arise related to her area of expertise. Put differently: an expert with respect to X should have greater knowledge-that and knowledge-how than most of her peers, *ceteris paribus*.

Propositions (1a) and (1b) are both reductive and fallibilist accounts of expertise. They hold that expertise with regard to X is just a kind of epistemic privilege with respect to X; thus, there is only a difference of degree, rather than kind, between an expert and novice. I assume something like a reliabilist account of justification<sup>3</sup>; that is, a doxastic state is justified if it was produced by a reliable

---

<sup>3</sup> Alvin I. Goldman, "Naturalistic Epistemology and Reliabilism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 19, 1 (1994): 301-320; John Greco, "Agent Reliabilism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 273-296; Jarrett Leplin, "In Defense of Reliabilism," *Philosophical Studies* 134, 1 (2007): 31-42;

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

process of some kind – a process is reliable just in case it produces a far greater number of true, rather than false, outputs over a sufficient period of time. Thus, if something is reliable, then there is conceptual room for its fallibility. Reliability allows for false outputs; any viable account of expertise must allow that experts are highly fallible.

For our purposes, I take it that the components of proposition (1b) are necessary conditions of expertise, or minimally, plausible candidates for necessary conditions. Proposition (1b) is made up of three components:

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>The reliability condition</i> | S is an expert in X just in case S is a reliable source of outputs relating to X.  |
| <i>The scarcity condition</i>    | Within their community, experts with regard to X should tend to be in the minority.  |
| <i>The heuristic condition</i>   | S enjoys expertise with regard to X just in case S knows, more so than those who are not experts, how to apply what she knows about X to novel situations. |

With a basic account of expertise in hand, I apply proposition (1b) to some examples.

Consider the following examples. Suppose that Mary is an economist who specializes in stock market trends. Whenever there is ever so slight a shift in stock prices, Mary tends to have already made the relevant predictions. We might suppose, for the sake of the example, that Mary has developed an advanced mathematical model that does the majority of the nitty-gritty calculations and predictions, even though Mary is responsible for its design and execution. Surely, even in the face of a few failed predictions from time to time, we would ascribe expertise in stock price prediction to Mary; she clearly meets all three of the plausible necessary conditions of expertise – assuming, of course, that her skill set is comparatively rare in her peer group.

Now consider Sam, a theoretical physicist working on a predictive model far beyond anything anticipated by his colleagues. As it turns out, long after Sam's death, his predictive model is shown to be completely accurate, minus a few details, to the extent that it anticipated theoretical problems that would not have been intelligible to other, equally well-trained physicists, who were contemporaries of Sam. Surely, in this case, we would ascribe expertise in predicting future trends in physics to Sam posthumously, even relative to his expert colleagues.

---

Michael Levin, "You Can Always Count on Reliabilism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, 3 (1997): 607-617.

## 3

Now that we have a rough idea of the conditions for expertise, I want to focus on the conditions we tend to follow ascribing expertise to others. Although we lack unmediated access to whether an individual enjoys truth-tracking doxastic practices – for instances, I cannot just *see* that someone has true beliefs; to see why consider the following argument: we value justification instrumentally because it is a reliable guide to discerning truth-tracking propositional attitudes<sup>4</sup> from those that are not – nonetheless, there are indicators of expertise that we right depend on. I will discuss a couple indicators: *institutional trust and innovation*.

To begin with, consider institutional trust. We recognize colleges, universities, job-training programs, apprentice-ships and so forth as institutions that, if employed properly, confer expertise on those who complete the programs. This is one reason we place epistemic value, to a greater or lesser extent, on graduating from an institutional of higher learning. At least in many cases, such is a good indication that one is closer to expertise with regard to their field of study than someone else without that sort of training, *ceteris paribus*. Notice, however, that expertise need not be conferred by a place of higher learning; being an apprentice to a master is another reliable indicator of expertise. That is, having successfully studied a particular practice under the direction of an established master confers indicators of expertise in the relevant field.<sup>5</sup>

Now, consider innovation – that is, meeting a set of specified success conditions that are rarely met. The ability to meet success conditions with regard to a particular area, reliably and on a regular basis, is a good indicator of expertise. Suppose that someone consistently uses a handheld device to locate gas and water pipes buried deep in the ground, where just about everyone else fails in this task; this is a good indication that the individual enjoys expertise with regard to locating gas and water pipes. Or, consider another example: someone who is skilled at carpentry enjoys the necessary expertise to build houses; e.g. those who have built houses for years surely enjoy home construction expertise.

With the conditions for expertise, and ascribing expertise in place, I want to apply the account of expertise we've been developing to the supposed expertise of philosophers.

---

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 8.

<sup>5</sup> I am not going to discuss how the institutions that confer expertise indicators gain their epistemic credentials for fear that the discussion will lead to the problem of easy knowledge. See: Stewart Cohen, "Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65, 2 (2002): 309-329.

Generally, we do not think that professional philosophers enjoy the same kind of expertise as scientists. Obviously, there is a sense in which professional philosophers enjoy expertise; that is, they are experts in that they have the ability to explain the view of a particular philosopher on such-and-such issue. For instance, there are experts who are well-qualified to talk about Hobbes' view of human freedom as it relates to his view of political sovereignty; or, there are philosophers who are more than qualified to explain the differences among the various Humean forks. Let us call this, second-order expertise; that is, it is expertise about the philosophical opinions *themselves* rather than expertise about philosophical matters.

There is a major factor that motivates our scepticism directed at the supposed first-order expertise of philosophers: the contentious methods they employ. To clarify the point, consider a passage from Earlenbaugh and Molyneux:

[...] one is not typically inclined to believe P on the basis of someone else intuiting that P. In this way, intuitions come apart from the standard basic evidential states, for no standard basic evidential state is subject sensitive in this way. One is willing to treat what other people seemed to see, what they seemed to hear, and what they seem to remember, as evidence, in the sense that one will base one's beliefs upon it. But one is not willing to base one's philosophical beliefs on the intuitions of another.<sup>6</sup>

For the most part, people do not treat the conceptual machinery and dialectic devices often used by philosophers, e.g. intuitions, thought experiments, fine-grained distinctions etc., as the sort of methods that enjoy evidential momentum; at least compared to perceptual and testimonial evidence, for example.

To clarify the issue, I will pursue it in greater detail.

Why think that philosophers lack first-order expertise? The argument stems from the reliability component of (1b) – if a group of philosophers enjoy the same degree of expertise, more or less, then they should enjoy roughly the same degree of reliability in the philosophical beliefs they hold; reliability is directly tied to its ratio of truth-tracking to false-tracking outputs; a reliable process is one that produces a greater number of true, rather than false, outputs over a sufficient period of time.

Consider an example: suppose that we compare calculators to test their accuracy. After a series of calculations, we find that out of twenty calculators, all but one calculator produced the same answer in every case. There is appears to be

---

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Earlenbaugh and Bernard Molyneux, "Intuitions Are Inclinations to Believe," *Philosophical Studies* 145, 1 (2009): 99.

good evidence for the following conclusion: the nineteen calculators that consistently agreed on the answer are probably reliable, while the single dissenting calculator is probably defective; that is, it is more plausible to suppose that one calculator failed, rather than supposing that nineteen failed, somehow managed to fail exactly the same way, every time. Thus, if something (or someone) is reliable with regard to Y, then on the basis of the truth-tracking nature of reliability, Y-related outputs should generally agree; call this principle, *the nature of reliability*.

Of course, there will be a few instances of disagreement, even among experts. For instance, there might be a paradigm shift in a sub-field of biology, leading to disagreement until a new paradigm is established. However, dissensus, by itself, is not an indicator that individuals lack first-order expertise (i.e. knowing whether some position or other is the case), unless the dissensus is persistent enough; for instance, if physicists were in constant turmoil, over the fundamental areas of their subject, such that they never established a body of fundamental knowledge, we would be much less inclined, than we generally are, to attribute expertise to them.

Now, consider *the problem of dissensus*. If a group of individuals count as experts with respect to X, then they should, generally speaking, have reliable X-related beliefs. It follows that if a group of people are experts with regard to X, then they should, *ceteris paribus*, reach consensus far more often than not – assuming we are talking about the same areas of specialization. But this is not the case with philosophers. Even though they are aware of the arguments, intuitions and thought experiments (including other relevant conceptual machinery) of their opponents, there is little, if any consensus, on just about every topic of philosophical interest; surely, the problem of dissensus, as an indicator of unreliability, is a good reason to think that philosophers lack first-order expertise.

Put differently, although professional philosophers meet the scarcity condition for expertise, they do not meet the heuristic and reliability conditions – or, at least, it does not appear that they do – for ascribing first-order philosophical expertise to them. To the extent that those conditions are necessary conditions of expertise, this is a problem for their supposed first-order expertise.

For instance, Christensen writes:

If you'd like to make a professional philosopher uncomfortable, try asking for clear examples of our discipline's achievements in settling the questions we study ... Of course, the worry is not about any dearth of philosophers with firm opinions on the great questions. It is about how few of these opinions have, over the years, achieved anything like consensus. Lack of consensus might well ... be

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

taken as evidence that the parties to the dispute lack good reason for confidence in their positions.<sup>7</sup>

Brennan agrees:

Philosophers disagree immensely in significant ways. Our best philosophers disagree over the doctrines, methods, and even the aims of philosophy. Experts in all fields disagree, but disagreement is more pervasive in philosophy than in most other fields.<sup>8</sup>

Even though professional philosophers are probably better at critical thinking, conceptual analysis and the history of philosophy than their layperson peers, there is no apparent reason to think they have better access to philosophical truths than their layperson, non-philosophical, counterparts. Surely philosophers have second-order expertise in areas such as conceptual analysis, critical thinking and the history of philosophy, but they do not have expertise when it comes to philosophical knowledge itself.

For instance, there is no compelling reason to think that philosophers, compared to their non-philosophical counterparts, are better placed to know whether or not there is a God, or if freedom of the will and causal determinism are compatible. Surely, philosophers are especially good at deciding whether or not an argument is any good. But that does not appear to translate into first-order expertise. To give a concrete example, there is *positive* evidence that ethicists do not act more ethically, generally speaking, than their non-ethicist academic counterparts.<sup>9</sup> However, it seems that *ceteris paribus*, if one has studied ethics extensively, and thus enjoys greater ethical knowledge, then they would be more inclined toward ethical behavior.

With this in mind, consider the following, formalized version, of the argument:<sup>10</sup>

1. If individuals A and B are experts with regard to X, then, *ceteris paribus*, they are generally reliable with regard to X (from [the reliability component]).

---

<sup>7</sup> David Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy," *Philosophy Compass* 4, 5 (2009): 756.

<sup>8</sup> Jason Brennan, "Scepticism about Philosophy," *Ratio* 23, 1 (2010): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel, "Do Ethicists Steal More Books?" *Philosophical Psychology* 22, 6 (2009): 711-725; Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust, "Do Ethicists and Political Philosophers Vote More Often Than Other Professors?" *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1, 2 (2010): 189-199.

<sup>10</sup> A similar argument can be formulated on the basis of the heuristic condition.



## Sceptical Thoughts on Philosophical Expertise

2. If A and B are generally reliable with regard to X, then, *ceteris paribus*, they should generally reach consensus with regard to X (from [the nature of reliability]).
3. Professional philosophers generally enjoy dissensus on first-order philosophical matters (from [the dissensus problem]).<sup>11</sup>
4. Thus, professional philosophers are not experts on first-order philosophical matters.

I take it that premises (1) and (2) are generally accepted features of expertise and reliability respectively; that is, irrespective of whether one thinks that professional philosophers enjoy first-order expertise, premises (1) and (2) are plausible. I take premise (3) to be a reasonable conclusion, merely based on the disputes between philosophers since the time of Plato. Those who are skeptical of dissensus among philosophers need only take a course in the history of philosophy. Thus, there is *at least some reason* to think that philosophers lack first-order expertise.

### 5

Finally, there are critics who will object like so: those who claim that philosophers lack first-order expertise undermine their argument. After all, denying that philosophers, by and large, lack first-order expertise is itself a first-order claim: it is the case that philosophers lack first-order expertise on philosophical matters – at a minimum, it appears that we should doubt that I could know that claim is true for the same reasons that we doubt philosopher’s first-order expertise. But if there is no first-order philosophical expertise, then anyone, whether or not they have been trained as a philosopher, can contradict this paper with the same degree of epistemic authority as her trained counterparts.

Surely, there are those who accept the expertise of philosophers on first-order philosophical issues; but, this prospect – the claim that there are critics, with as much evidential authority as the professional sceptic who disagree – undermines the authority for the claim that philosophers lack first-order expertise; after all, if there are no first-order philosophical experts, then one person’s opinion is just as good as everyone else, at least on philosophical issues. Thus, the claim that philosophers cannot lack (first-order) expertise appears self-defeating.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> It is possible that are some reliable philosophers, even though the vast majority of their colleagues are not; although this is possible, it is highly implausible. Rather, we should suppose that either almost everyone is more or less reliable, or nobody is reliable.

<sup>12</sup> There are philosophers who appeal to a similar argument against those who are skeptical of the evidential credentials of philosophical *intuitions*. See: George Bealer, “The a priori,” in

The objection is right, at least as far as it goes – if I claimed to *know* that philosophers lack first-order expertise, I would be stuck in the same epistemic boat as other philosophers. However, the objection ultimately misses the point. Throughout the paper, I employ what I call *doxastic motivators*. That is, I appeal to what are hopefully either beliefs, or minimally, inclinations to believe, on the part of my audience, those propositions that are dialectically sympathetic to the point of this paper.

For instance, I take it as granted that many people will be sympathetic to the following claim: if a group of people is reliable with regard to Z, then they should generally reach consensus with regard to Z, *ceteris paribus*. The same degree of plausibility is assumed for the other components of the argument. If there is reason to suppose that philosophers lack first-order expertise, and this paper appears to rely on first-order expertise, then the charitable move would be to interpret the arguments made in this paper in doxastic terms (i.e. non-evidentially).

To conclude, it seems, based on the reductive analysis of expertise, there is good reason to suppose that although philosophers enjoy expertise on second-order philosophical issues, such as conceptual analysis and the history of philosophy, it seems doubtful that they have something akin to first-order expertise, such as whether they have the right position on the nature of freedom, justice, knowledge and so forth.