

# Introduction

## Experts and Expertise. Interdisciplinary Issues

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Today the role of experts is pervasive in the everyday life of both individuals and communities. At the collective level, governments and groups routinely delegate scientific, economic and technological decisions to experts; expert witnesses play a key role in legal contexts, and the evaluation of academic and scientific institutions is demanded to expert peers. At the individual level, each of us defers to experts for the correct understanding of problems, issues, concepts and word meanings in some domains, and trusts experts blindly at least in some cases. Finally, both communities and individuals face the problem of what to do when experts disagree.

The study of experts and expertise lies at the intersection of cognitive and social psychology, epistemology, economics, philosophy of law, and philosophy of language, but the various perspectives seldom meet together. For these reasons, we think it is timely to pose fundamental questions on the notions of expert and expertise in an interdisciplinary manner, so that issues raised within a specific debate may find solutions and integrations from other debates. The aim of this issue of the present journal is to collect a variety of points of view on the topics of experts and expertise, with a special focus on the following issues:

- what experts are, and what the criteria are for individuating them;
- how expert cognition differs from layperson cognition in specific domains;

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- whether and to what extent it is rational to trust experts, provided that we cannot assess their competence;
- how it is correct to characterize experts' disagreement, and what we are to do when experts disagree.

Thus the essays collected here range from theoretical questions about expertise to practical ones related to expert knowledge and advice. Among the former, some of the contributions discuss the features of expertise not only to better grasp it but also to distinguish true experts from fake ones, or at least reliable from less reliable expert opinions. Among the latter, several contributions touch upon the issue of democracy in the age of expertise, starting from the assumption that expertise applied to political, legal and economic decisions is in tension – to say the least – with the idea that citizens should be on the same footing when public decisions are made. It is not surprising that it is so. On the one hand, it seems perfectly reasonable to defer to expert cognition and have a world characterized by some division of the cognitive labor. On the other hand, it seems equally reasonable to let people decide what they want from life and institutions. For instance, should expert medical advice constrain our habits and lifestyle in general? Should expert economic advice constrain governments? Should expert forensic opinions constrain judges and juries? If not, why ask them to give their advice? If yes, why not let them decide in the first place what is good for us as individuals and communities?

There is an easy way-out, in theory. It is the salutary Humean division of questions of fact and questions of value. Emphatically put, it is the fact/value dichotomy that saves us from all sorts of expert confusion. If someone gives us expert cognition, they give us a piece of knowledge that we non-experts could not get (or could get at a significantly greater cost). But as a piece of knowledge it simply relates some fact. And according to Hume we cannot infer values from facts. Or, to put it differently, we cannot derive an ought from an is. So, expertise correctly understood does not constrain practical decision in any strong sense. It simply provides knowledge for a better-informed decision-making. In a liberal society, it is good to have some medical advice, but it's bad to have the physician decide in our place what we should do, eat and drink. Similarly, it is good to have the government supported by economic advice, but it's bad to have economists decide in place of elected bodies. And it's good to have judges and juries informed by experts, but it's bad to let experts decide. It

is conceptually and logically bad, first and foremost, because knowledge by itself doesn't tell us what to do, if Hume was right.

However, it's true that in the real world important issues are terribly complex, and it's often hard to discriminate fact from value, let alone true from fake experts and what to do when experts disagree (which happens almost always). On a philosophical tone, we need also consider the (slippery?) distinction of "knowledge that" and "knowledge how"; the first is theoretical, so to say, and the second practical. Does this blur the Humean division? Is it possible to have an expert practical advice if it expresses a form of "knowledge how"? In addition, what is the relevant notion of "experience" at play here? And what is the appropriate propositional attitude towards expertise? Belief or acceptance?

In sum, there are many questions and issues raised by the pervasive role of experts in our world. Of course the present collection doesn't provide any definitive answer to them, but we think it provides at least some good insight and food for thought.

