

# What Is An Expert That A Person May Trust Her? Towards A Political Epistemology Of Expertise

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## ABSTRACT

I present a definition of expertise that involves both epistemic and political authority. I argue that these two forms of authority require different treatments and defend a political epistemology that articulates a division of cognitive labor between political and epistemic authority.

Keywords: epistemic authority, political epistemology, democracy.

The appeal to expertise is pervasive in contemporary societies. The need of experts has become a distinct feature of mature democracies, as if a new form of authority - epistemic authority - were slowly eroding and replacing the political authority of governments. Crucial decisions - as that of declaring war - are made dependent on expert reports about, for example, the presence of nuclear weapons or the violation of human rights in a particular country. An example of the new role of expertise in political decision, that I have analyzed elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> was the 2003 war against Iraq, declared by United States and Great Britain with the following mission: “to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein’s support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people”.<sup>2</sup> The political aim was thus submitted to the assessment of evidence about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the involvement of Iraq’s regime with terrorist activities that could have harmed United States or Great Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Origgi, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030322.html>

The authority of politics seems thus dependent in many circumstances on the authority of knowledge, a paradoxical outcome of democracies whose authority should be based on the free expression of opinions of the many organized through appropriate and shared procedures (such as vote) and not on individual's special capacities.

The relation between expertise and democracy has always been problematic and it constitutes a central issue of political philosophy. Democracy is an anti-authoritarian regime, whose one fundamental tenet is the neutrality vis à vis of the opinions of people: no opinions expressed by a particular group should be favored by the State. In this respect, expertise is essentially authoritarian. It imposes itself as a better opinion that should be endorsed on the basis of the epistemic authority of those who hold it, in spite of public discussion and deliberation. That the Earth turns around the Sun and not vice versa, has to be accepted as a “better opinion” because it is endorsed by an elite of credible scientists whose epistemic standards cannot be questioned by the layman.

That is why many authors who consider themselves as advocates of democracy have condemned expertise as a threat to democratic regimes. Hanna Arendt writes against experts: “There are, indeed, few things that are more frightening than the steadily increasing prestige of scientifically minded brain trusters in the councils of government during the last decades. The trouble is not that they are cold-blooded enough to “think the unthinkable” but that they do not think”.<sup>3</sup> What she means is the experts do not think critically about society and democratic life: they produce “cold truths” that can be manipulated by power to produce visions of society that are not what citizens want and need.

Another major criticism to the role of scientific expertise in societies is that of Jurgen Habermas. In his essay on “Science and Technology as Ideology”<sup>4</sup>, mainly dedicated to a critique of Marcuse's thesis of technology as domination, he denounces the risks of new technocratic democracies: “The technocracy thesis has been worked out in several versions on the intellectual level. What seems to me more important is that it can also become a background ideology that penetrates into the consciousness of depoliticized mass of the population where it can take on legitimating power”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Arendt 1969, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Habermas 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibidem* p. 253.

This tension opens a series of questions that I would like to address in this paper:

Are knowledge and expertise essentially authoritarian?

On what form of authority the justification of power must rely on?

Is the idea of democracy compatible with the idea of authority?

These questions cannot be addressed without a preliminary analysis of what it means to be an expert. Is it possible to give some elements of an epistemology of expertise in order to work out a definition of an “expert”?

In his influential book on the politics of expertise, Stephen Turner distinguishes between five kinds of experts: 1. Experts whose expertise is generally acknowledged by everyone in a society (doctors, physicists); 2. Experts whose personal expertise is acknowledged by certain individuals (like authors of self help books, consultants, etc.); 3. Experts who are members of groups that are the only ones who acknowledge their expertise (theologians whose authority is recognized only by the members of the same sect); 4. Experts whose audience is the public, but who are supported by influential parties interested in the acceptance of their opinions (members of think tanks, researchers paid by private foundations with a political agenda); 5. Experts whose audience are bureaucracies with discretionary powers, who appoint themselves the experts on a specific administrative question and then implement the proposed solutions by selecting them through criteria and procedures that are typical of the bureaucratic decision making system.<sup>6</sup>

The problematic categories for liberal democracies are especially 4 and 5, that is, the expertise that is solicited, used and legitimized by the political powers. In these forms of expertise, that are so pervasive in our liberal democracies, there is a sort of “delegation of authority” from political authority to experts’ authority in a way that violates the principle of neutrality that is at the core of liberal thought. The acknowledgment of the expertise of doctors is clearly not a threat to democracy, nor the submission of a tiny part of the population to the authority of psychoanalysts or other kinds of guru. What is problematic is the endorsement of expertise by bureaucrats who have discretionary powers to “use” this expertise to influence public policies and political decisions.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Turner (2014)

What is an expert then? It is someone whose epistemic authority is granted and legitimized by political stakeholders who have an interest in delegating part of their authority to the cognitive authority of experts.

In this sense, the definition of an “expert” is different from that of a “scientist”: experts, as scientists, 1. are people who hold a special cognitive authority on a subject matter, and 2. their cognitive authority may be delegated to in a process of decision making that has political, societal or personal stakes for the categories of people who defer to them.

To be an expert thus implies that someone defers to your expertise in taking crucial decisions. This second clause makes expertise potentially dangerous for democracy because it creates a bias for an opinion that will be adopted out of deference by some parties, thus violating the neutrality condition. In the case of science, deference doesn't have the same role in selecting and legitimizing a scientific idea. Science, as an organized activity, selects its own ideas through a process of peer review that involves insiders only. The scientific community is the ultimate producer, evaluator and consumer of scientific truths that are considered, as such, neutral. Although this idealized picture of science can be challenged by a more fine grained sociological analysis of the forces at stake in the selection of scientific “truths”, the distinction between experts and scientists holds: a scientist may become an expert when she fulfills the second condition, but she is not necessarily an expert. On the other hand, the category of experts can include people who have cognitive authority in extra-scientific domains. Connoisseurs have cognitive authority on art, wine, taste and their authority may be solicited in various contexts. Expertise may involve a form of “knowing how”, a practical knowledge that gives authority to its beholder, but cannot be clearly spelled out in scientific terms. Take a dowser or a graphologist, or the identikit expert able to draw a sketch of a crime scene out of the description given by a witness: these kinds of expertise are not considered mainstream science, but they can be solicited by policy makers in certain situations.

Experts have knowledge that can be deferred to in order to take decisions and coordinate behavior in a society. Yet, their legitimacy as authorities does not depend on their community only, but on a societal consensus of stakeholders. Thus a series of crucial epistemological questions inevitably become political questions. Who does decide the level of expertise necessary to lead politics towards a certain choice that may have heavy consequences for the society? When the quest for “truth” should stop so that a decision must be

taken? Who does evaluate the experts? Are they politically responsible, that is, if their recommendations turn out to be harmful for the society, should they be considered accountable? A recent case that shows this tension was that of a series of experts meetings in Italy in order to estimate the probability of a disruptive earthquake in the area of the town L'Aquila, in the Abruzzi region, that ended up with a report that clearly underestimated the risks and a subsequent trial against the earth scientists involved in the expertise<sup>7</sup>. An international debate then burst among scientists to defend the neutrality of science and the fact that a scientific opinion cannot be subject to a post-hoc trial dependent on its success or failure. The defense of the scientific world was based on an apparently self-evident distinction for the scientists between the realm of "facts" with their associated probabilities, and the realm of "decisions". But each time experts are solicited for a political decision, the distinction seems easily blurred. What are the facts and what the decisions? Isn't an underestimation of a probability of occurrence of a certain fact in itself a political choice? Again, who decides the appropriate level of expertise that should be appealed to in order to make a wise move? Policy making is the realm of choices and sometimes a bad choice is better than no choice. Another example of the interaction between expertise and policy making, and of the difficulty to distinguish between them, was the case around the Ash Cloud in April 2010 that forced the ministers of transports in Europe to block the airspace for several days, apparently causing more harm than that which could have been caused by the ash cloud itself.<sup>8</sup> In this case, expert advice was clearly undetermined, given that the evidence available on previous cases of cloud ashes produced by volcanic eruption was not informative about the estimation of possible harm to flights. The decision of closing the airspace was a political decision taken at the European level on the basis of an extra-scientific principle, the Precautionary Principle, that is part of the Lisbon Treaty (art. 191) and lays the foundations of the European attitude on the relation between science and policy making, a principle that is highly contextual and not unanimously accepted across different countries<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. on this case G. Origgi: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/10/24/1%E2%80%99aquila-bastava-attenersi-al-principio-di-precauzione-europeo/392148/>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://edge.org/conversation/the-ash-cloud>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. on the Ash Cloud case: <https://edge.org/conversation/the-ash-cloud>

This poses a problem of “political epistemology” as Turner puts it: “In many cases people want guidance to solve problems that they consider important, and will embrace any credible expert who claims to have a solution or even some more fact relevant to the solution. But policy questions and the kinds of knowledge relevant to them is never a matter of “facts” of the sort that experts possess”<sup>10</sup>. Policy goes beyond the facts and, for many authors, the distinction between what is in the realm of facts and what is in the realm of politics, as they were two different spheres, is itself “political”. According to Michel Foucault’s political epistemology<sup>11</sup>, each society has its own “regime of truth”, that is, its way of prying apart what can be subject of scientific discourse and what cannot. This is eminently “political”, that is, that it contributes to power as constituted by accepted forms of knowledge. The fact that a society accepts certain types of discourse and not others, and make them function as “true” is a political stance, and not only an epistemic one.

Thus, the core problem of political epistemology is to try to define the principles of a fair “division of cognitive labor” between two kinds of authority: epistemic authority and political authority.

The concept of “authority” is central both to political philosophy and to social science. It has to do with the legitimacy of power: a political choice has authority if it can “force” people to political obligation without coercing them. Science thus can be a way of legitimizing power by giving it the authority through the display of rational arguments that compel people to follow a certain conduct. If science says that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions participate to global warming (the “fact”) and that global warming has potential disruptive effects on our life on Earth, then, policy makers have a strong legitimacy in forcing policies that restrain citizens and industries’ emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Thus, epistemic authority (that is, authority over beliefs) may legitimize political authority (authority over conducts) but does not reduce to it. A democratic and pluralist society needs transparent procedures and rules to make the two interact in an acceptable way. That is why contemporary societies need to develop “political epistemologies” that is, rules and principles that legitimize the interplay between political and epistemic authority.

Authority is a very special sort of reason for action. To defer to authority is to refrain from insisting on personal examination and acceptance of the thing

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Turner, cit. loc 1203.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Foucault, 1970.

one is being asked to do or believe as a necessary condition for doing or believing it. To cite authority as a reason for doing an act (or believing an opinion) is to put a stop to the demand for reasons at the level of the act itself and to transfer one's reasons to another person's will or judgment.

Most sociological and moral theories of authority fail to make the distinction between epistemic vs. political authority and present themselves as simultaneously accounting for the two concepts. The most striking example of this lack of distinction is the Foucaultian motto: "Knowledge is Power".

There are some obvious parallels between the notion of epistemic and that of political authority. Trust in authority poses a similar puzzle in both cases. How can someone - an institution or an individual - legitimately impose her/its will on other people's and have a right to rule over their conducts? How is this compatible with freedom and autonomy? And why should we trust an authority to impose us a duty to obey for our own good?

Much ink has been spilt on this apparent paradoxical relation between trust in authority and freedom. And of course an equivalent puzzle can be reformulated in the case of epistemic trust: How can it ever be rational to surrender our reason and accept what another person says on the basis that she is saying this? What does it mean to grant epistemic authority to other people? As the philosopher R.B. Friedman has rightly pointed out: "A person may be said to have authority in two distinct senses: For one, he may be said to be 'in authority', meaning that he occupies some office, position or status which entitles him to make decisions about how other people should behave. But, secondly, a person may be said to be 'an authority', meaning that his views or utterances are entitled to be believed"<sup>12</sup>.

In both cases, the appeal to authority calls for an explanation or a normative justification of the legitimacy of the authoritative source, a legitimacy that must be acknowledged by those who submit to it. Still, I think that trust in epistemic authority and in political authority are two distinct phenomena that deserve a separate treatment.

As we have seen, epistemic authority poses the further problem of its legitimacy. Where does the authority over our beliefs come from? Why do we trust teachers at school, parents, experts of any sort? Why do we accept that even words in our language have the meaning they conventionally have on the basis of an act of deference to the uses that others make of these words?

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R.B. Friedman, 1990, p. 77.

Epistemic authority is pervasive in our cognitive life and yet, if we had to justify all our beliefs on the basis of reasons we hold for accepting them from others, our cognitive life would become too complex to be adapted to the complex tasks we have to solve everyday.

In order to make sense of our pervasive deference to epistemic authority, I will appeal to the notion of “division of cognitive labor”, that was introduced in this domain by Hilary Putnam in his famous essay on the deferential uses of language (actually, he used the expression of “division of linguistic labor”, later extended to scientific expertise by the epistemologists Hilary Kornblith and Philip Kitcher)<sup>13</sup>. I will try to argue that the division of cognitive labor has broader applications than the one envisaged by Putnam. The mechanisms of the division of cognitive labor should be at the heart of our “political epistemologies”. That is the only way of avoiding paranoid attitudes towards the authority of science in our societies and making scientific and political authority supporting each other instead of eroding each other.

What is the division of cognitive labor? According to Philip Kitcher, who coined the expression in an influential 1990 paper, it is the social structure that optimizes the progress of science, that is, an optimal distribution of effort within the scientific community. It may be better for a scientific community to attack a given problem by encouraging some members to pursue one strategy and others to pursue another, rather than all pursue the single most promising strategy. The division of cognitive labor is thus the set of principles, conventions, role attributions that distribute knowledge within a community by allocating a reasonable effort to each mind according to its specificities and competences. Although Kitcher sees it as an “optimization” strategy, we may weaken his requirements to adapt his notion to the understanding of the role of expertise and epistemic authority in our political epistemologies. I do not think that the aim of a fair division of cognitive labor is an optimization aim. That would be another way of making the rational demands of science ruling our societies, an attitude that has revealed disastrous in many political experiences of the XX century (take socialism and its insistence on “objective, rationale and expert procedures”).

A division of cognitive labor for a society that is the more and more epistemically dependent on expert authority means the mastery of a series of principles and rules of conversation that empower each parties of the society

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Putnam, 1975; Kornblith, 1993; Kitcher, 1990.



even when the asymmetries of knowledge are inevitable. As we have already said, there is not “factual knowledge” distinct from “political authority”, at least not in the realms that matter for ordinary people such as health, security, ecology, life expectancy, etc.

Mature techno-scientific democracies have reintroduced a form of appeal to epistemic authority whose aim is a “rationalization” and optimization of political decisions. But a responsible political epistemology should not have this aim. Its aim should be that of the inclusion of most citizens, who are in a deferential position towards knowledge, in the assessment of the political impact of an expert-based decision. Expert advice is not neutral: assessing the “potential harm” of a certain fact means connecting some evidence based analysis with a world of values and expectancies. The decision process cannot avoid to take into account these values and hopes in choosing a line of action over another. Values and hopes are not a matter of expertise: we may value more the present generation than the future generations, thus discounting the consequences of our everyday actions on the survival of the planet, or we may be more far-sighted and value the future of our species more than our present interest. We may value precaution in health and ecology matters because we are committed to a vision of humanity we want to defend even when science tells us that it can become obsolete: a humanist vs. a transhumanist approach to human nature for example is not a matter of scientific expertise, but of a choice of value. We may value security against the technocratic arm-race in defense policies and thus collectively deliberate that the potential risks of new technologies of war, such as robots and drones in provoking resentment and future conflicts are more important than the potential benefits of the use of these technologies for our defense. We may value privacy and freedom more than security and thus oppose to the growing governmental demand in major democracies of surveillance of citizens. If we, as citizens, cannot enter on the subject matter of the installation of an algorithm of surveillance of the networks, we are wholly competent in deciding in which kind of world we want to live.

In conclusion, expertise is not just knowledge. It is delegated authority. And, as any form of authority in democracy, it needs to be legitimized without appealing to any special cognitive capacity of its citizens. Illiterate citizens, citizen coming from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, young and senior citizens, all have a voice not on the expert report, but on the way the expert report connects to the policies around which it has been solicited. That

is the division of cognitive labor that an expert-dependent society needs in order to avoid a technocratic turn that is presented sometimes as an inevitable evolution of our forms of life. Societies can improve and change themselves without “optimize” themselves: the room for debate, error, and revision is the main task of political epistemology.

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