**Epistemic Authority**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sally is hiking in the forest with her dad. While she is about to pick what she takes to be a beautiful porcino mushroom, her dad warns her: “Careful, that is a poisonous *boletus satanas*!” Sally’s dad has decades of experience in picking mushrooms and is extremely skillful – much more skillful than Sally is – in recognizing edible ones. Sally is aware of this. She therefore readily comes to believe that what she was about to pick is a poisonous mushroom and walks away. It is quite intuitive that Sally does the right thing. She behaves epistemically as she should, because her dad is better epistemically positioned than she is in the relevant domain. We might call him her *epistemic authority* as far as mushrooms are concerned.

But what exactly does this involve? What makes Sally’s dad an epistemic authority for his daughter? Sally’s dad is certainly no disciplinary expert in the mushroom domain. And yet his word is authoritative, i.e., has special epistemic weight for Sally. How is epistemic authority different than expertise? Sally is no complete amateur as far as mushrooms are concerned. She probably had what she took to be very good reasons to believe that what she was about to pick was a porcino mushroom. When she aligns to her dad’s view, what happens (and what should happen) to her existing reasons and her take on the matter?

The structure of this entry is the following. Section 2 gives a brief explication of the notion of epistemic authority. Section 3 clarifies the relation between epistemic authority and expertise. Section 4 tackles the question of how we should reasonably react in realizing that our epistemic authority holds a certain view.

2. EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY: A TENTATIVE EXPLICATION

What does it mean to be an epistemic authority? As a first tentative explication, we might assume that an epistemic authority for me is an epistemic agent[[1]](#endnote-1) who is, and whom I reasonably take to be, substantially better epistemically positioned than I am relative to a certain topic or subject matter.

This brief explication highlights that the concept of epistemic authority includes what we might call an objective and a subjective component. Being an epistemic authority is not only a matter of having certain features or qualities, but also a matter of being recognized by other epistemic agents (at least one) *as having* those features or qualities (Constantin & Grundmann 2020: 4114)[[2]](#endnote-2). An important result of this is that there cannot be unrecognized epistemic authorities – while there certainly can be unrecognized experts (see section 3 for an analysis of the relation between authority and expertise). The explication highlights also that epistemic authority is a relative concept. More precisely, epistemic authority is subject- and domain-relative: an agent might be an epistemic authority for me, but not for you (because, e.g., you are better epistemically positioned than I am); and an agent might be my epistemic authority relative to certain domains, but not to others. It is also important to take time in consideration. An agent who is my epistemic authority at time t1 might lose this status at time t2 – either because our relative epistemic positions changed (maybe, as it sometimes happens, the pupil became the master) or because my reasonable assessment of the agent’s epistemic position changed (Jäger 2016).

Jäger *forthcoming* suggests a fruitful way in which this initial explication could be refined, namely by adding a further sense in which the notion of epistemic authority should be conceived as relative: an agent is an epistemic authority for me not only relative to a certain topic or subject matter and point in time, but also *relative to a certain epistemic good* (that I value, that is relevant for me and that I strive to achieve in a certain context). An agent can be my epistemic authority as far as knowledge is concerned, for instance, without being (and being reasonably taken to be) a genuine “understander” of the relevant subject matter[[3]](#endnote-3). Maybe the same works also the other way around: an agent can be my epistemic authority as far as understanding is concerned, without knowing much about the relevant subject matter (Socrates could be a case in point). Once this further relativization to epistemic goods comes into the picture, it becomes clear that there is probably no context-independent way to spell out what it means for my epistemic authority to be better epistemically positioned than I am relative to a certain subject matter. My epistemic authority can be better epistemically positioned than I am in the sense that she has a larger number of true beliefs than I do, that she has a superior amount of knowledge, that she has better, deeper, more systematic understanding, and so on.

3. EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY AND EXPERTISE

How does epistemic authority relate to expertise? The two concepts overlap. An expert in theoretical physics can be my epistemic authority as far as the structure of microphysical reality is concerned. We treat experts as epistemic authorities all the time. Very often, we confer epistemic authority to someone in light of (the appreciation of) her expertise. However, the notions of epistemic authority and expertise are neither extensionally nor intensionally equivalent. Not all experts are epistemic authorities, and not all epistemic authorities are experts.

We have seen that the notion of epistemic authority combines an objective and a subjective element: an essential part of being an epistemic authority is being recognized as such by someone. This does not hold for expertise. While experts can, and indeed often are recognized as such (by laypeople, institutions, other experts, and so on), this is a contingent, and not an essential aspect of what makes them experts (Goldman 2018). If Charles Darwin had never returned from the Galapagos Islands, and his notebooks had never been found, he would still be an expert, say, on the Galapagos turtle. Similarly, it is hard to deny that Galileo Galilei was an expert on astronomical phenomena; the fact that he happened to live in a hostile epistemic environment in which most scientists and non-scientists were reluctant to recognize his merits did not (and does not) put his expertise in jeopardy (Malfatti 2019). Expertise, then, differently than epistemic authority, is a purely objective feature. Or, to put it somewhat more precisely: while epistemic authority is a four-place predicate (an agent is an epistemic authority for someone, relative to a certain subject matter, and relative to a certain epistemic good), expertise is a two-place predicate (someone is an expert relative to a certain subject matter). This excludes the possibility that someone is an expert for me, but not for you. If someone is an expert, she is such for everyone – even for her peers, i.e., other experts, and for her epistemic superiors, i.e., more competent experts (Croce 2018 and 2019a, Fricker 2006).

We have seen also that if someone is my epistemic authority, she is, and I reasonably take her to be, better epistemically positioned than I am relative to a certain topic or subject matter. In other words: she is, and I reasonably take her to be, my *epistemic superior* within a certain domain. Experts are also crucially characterized appealing to their epistemic superiority in a certain domain[[4]](#endnote-4). However, the contrast class that matters for expertise is different than the one that matters for epistemic authority. Epistemic authorities are (substantially) epistemically superior to *someone else* (i.e., to at least one agent).Experts, on the other hand, are (substantially) epistemically superior to *most people*, or to *laypeople* (Coady 2012, Fricker 2006, Goldman 2001, Grundmann 2021). Going back to the example in the introduction: Sally’s dad is substantially better *than Sally* at spotting truths in the mushroom domain, and Sally is aware of this; this is enough to make him an epistemic authority *for Sally*. As he is certainly not better at spotting truths in the mushroom domain than most people, he does not deserve the status of mushroom expert.

4. BELIEVING ON AUTHORITY?

How should I reasonably react in realizing that my epistemic authority holds a certain view on a question that lies in her domain of competence? Philosophers disagree on how this question should be answered. So much, however, seems uncontentious: an essential part of treating an epistemic agent as one’s epistemic authority on a certain question is being disposed to assign *special epistemic weight* to her view on the matter. But what does it exactly mean?

Zagzebski (2012, 2013, 2014, 2016) famously argues that the fact that my epistemic authority believes (and/or claims) that *p* does not simply provide me with a reason to believe *p* that goes to supplement the pool of reasons that I already have and that I take to be relevant in assessing whether *p* or not *p*. Rather, it provides me with a very special kind of reason – which she calls *preemptive reason* – “that *replaces* my other reasons relevant to believing *p* and is not simply *added* to them” (Zagzebski 2012:107, emphasis added). Keren defends a similar view (see Keren 2007, 2014, 2020). Treating an epistemic agent as one’s epistemic authority, Keren argues, crucially involves one’s disposition to epistemically *trust* the agent in question when she claims that something is the case. When we trust a speaker about a certain proposition *p*, or so Keren argues, we screen off, or disregard, our previous evaluation of the matter (if we have any) and start believing *p* exclusively *on the speaker’s authority*. In other words, we put ourselves in the speaker’s hands as far as the truth of the testified proposition is concerned. Given that we trust someone epistemically, using our own reasons to make our epistemic position safer or more stable becomes impermissible, Keren contends, because trust is incompatible with “taking precautions” (Keren 2014: 2600). I cannot trust you to water my plants, e.g., and at the same time install an automatic watering system that activates in case the soil becomes too dry. Either I trust you, or I have a back-up plan meant to ensure that, no matter what happens, the goal I care about will be reached – I cannot do both (Baier 1986, Elster 2007).

Constantin and Grundmann 2020 develop and defend a refined version of the preemption view, which they label “defeatist preemptionism”. Their core claim can be summarized thus: one’s appreciation of the fact that one’s epistemic authority believes that *p* works very much like an undercutting defeater, which makes one’s existing evidence for and against *p* *rationally unusable*. Once I realize that my authority holds a certain view, or so the authors argue, it becomes rationally impermissible for me to use any evidence relevant to the matter that I might have. This is because in treating someone as my epistemic authority concerning *p*, I reasonably assume that the evidence that I have considered in assessing whether *p* forms a (probably very tiny) subset of the evidence that my authority considered (Constantin and Grundmann 2020: 4116).

While preemptionism seems to prescribe the right epistemic behavior in some cases (in particular, in those cases in which the epistemic gap between the agents involved is particularly deep, and the epistemically inferior agent is aware of this), as a general thesis about how one should adjust one’s epistemic position in light of one’s authority’s view, preemptionism seems wrong or at least problematic.

We have seen that preemtionism demands from the epistemically inferior agent who realizes that her authority believes that *p* to screen off, or disregard, all the reasons for and against *p* that she might have. Importantly, this is supposed to happen also in those cases in which the epistemically inferior agent happens to *agree* with her authority, i.e., in those cases in which her authority’s view *confirms* her own. As Jäger has pointed out, however, we tend to take the fact that we agree with our authority on whether *p* as a (*prima facie*) good reason to believe that the reasons that we deployed in assessing whether *p* are good ones. Arguably, this is not just a natural tendency; this is probably how it should be. By preempting in cases of agreement with my authority, thus, I might drop or lose potentially good reasons, which seems like an epistemically unwelcome result (Jäger 2016 labels this the problem of “unhinging proper bases”).

A closely related worry is the following. What motivates preemptionism is the idea that, given our authority’s epistemic superiority, it would be epistemically beneficial for us to defer to the authority’s view, instead of exercising our own reasoning abilities in trying to figure out things for ourselves. Preempting is desirable, then, because by preempting we tend to maximize the probability of epistemic progress – or so preemptionists claim. Dormandy (2018) has challenged this idea, by showing that in certain circumstances, preempting one’s reasons actually leads to an epistemic *regress*, and not to an epistemic progress. The grounds for endorsing preemptionism become even shakier once we consider epistemic goals other than knowledge and true belief, e.g., the goal of understanding. According to many, understanding a certain phenomenon *P* crucially involves an awareness and appreciation of the reasons supporting the explanatory framework(s) accounting for *P* that one endorses (Jäger 2016, Kvanvig 2003). If this conception of understanding is along the right lines, believing on authority and screening off one’s reasons would obstruct, and not foster, the kind of epistemic progress associated with advancements in understanding. This does not prove preemptionism completely false; however, it does suggest that its domain of application is probably more restricted than its proponents believe. (For more extensive criticisms of the preemption view, see Hauswald 2020, Jäger 2016, Lackey 2016, Steward 2020 and Wright 2016. For an attempt of reconciling preemption and the goal of understanding, see Croce 2018.)

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1. We also talk of collective entities such as groups, communities, and institutions to have epistemic authority. Whether the epistemic authority of a collective entity is a distinctively collective epistemic feature or whether it reduces to the epistemic authority of its individual members is a highly relevant question in the current epistemological landscape. See Zagzebski 2012 and Croce 2019b for initial explorations of this topic. In this entry, I will restrict my attention to the epistemic authority of individual epistemic agents. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bokros (2020, 7) defines epistemic authority in merely subjective terms. She suggests that “*A* is an epistemic authority for *S* with respect to *p* iff *S* judges *A* to have a higher expected accuracy with respect to *p* than *S* takes herself to have independently of following *A*´s authority”. As Jäger *forthcoming* points out, however, such a subjective characterization is not without problems. Among other things, it forces us to say that one can be our epistemic authority in a certain domain, while actually, objectively, she is our epistemic peer or even epistemic inferior. This sounds like a counteractive result. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The exact relation between understanding and knowledge is a matter of dispute. Reductionists claim that understanding reduces to knowledge. Antireductionists disagree and claim that understanding and knowledge are different epistemic achievements. It is hard to deny, however, that an agent can know a great deal about a topic, without understanding it. Reductionists would claim that what is missing in a similar case is simply more knowledge or better justification (Kelp 2015, Khalifa 2017). Antireductionists would say that what is missing is a peculiar *grasp* of or *insight* about how the relevant truths that one knows are related to one another (Elgin 2017, Hills 2016, Zagzebski 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Which kind of epistemic superiority is relevant for expertise? This is a controversial question in the current literature. Goldman (2001) famously defends a veritistic criterion. In Goldman (2018:5) he writes:“*S* is an expert about domain *D* if and only if (A) *S* has more true beliefs (or high credences) in propositions concerning *D* than most people do, and fewer false beliefs; and (B) the absolute number of true beliefs *S* has about propositions in *D* is very substantial.” A veritistic criterion, however, is not without problems. What about scientists of the past, who used to hold true (and maybe even developed) excellent theories that turned out to be untenable, or utterly wrong? It would certainly be very odd if our account of expertise ruled out thinkers such as Ptolemy, or Stahl. Croce 2019, Quast 2018 (and Goldman 2018 himself) have offered alternative criteria to identify experts to avoid this problem. The issue is obviously too complex to be pursued here, and its solution is not essential for shedding light on the relation between epistemic authority and expertise. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)