Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Authority in an Age of Expertise

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ABSTRACT: The potential for experts to exploit their positions of authority requires attention to the role of epistemic work as part of the social division of labour. Expertise has not become so distant from social hierarchy as we sometimes fancy, and evaluating expertise requires political analysis.

KEYWORDS: argument, authority, bias, command, expertise, motivation, reasoning, social status, testimony, trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

Authority and trust have always raised questions for feminist scholars: Why do women and other socially marginalized people suffer disproportionately under supposedly just authorities? Why do we trust authorities that deny our moral and rational status, even refusing to count us as normal human beings for clinical trials? Understandings and procedures that count as expertise, such as the practice of giving women medicine tested only on men, contribute to women’s suffering and marginalization.

Among the forms of expertise that have done damage to women, including legal expertise, the rise of medical expertise has been most cruelly ironic, Lorraine Code argues. The rise of medical science took over by various means the midwifery and lay-healing performed primarily by working-class women and thus subjected all women to the authority of white upper-class men. Likewise child-rearing and housework became matters in which women are no longer trusted but taken to need instruction and monitoring. So women have come to lack authority in the very domains that define their own gender and that submissiveness has come to define the gender. “When possibilities of being a ‘good enough’ woman and mother depend on relinquishing trust in their own skills in favor of a more distinguished expertise, it is not surprising that women would do what was expected of them.” (Code, 1991, p. 207). The expectation that women will be trusting makes women especially vulnerable to self-doubt and inclined to defer to experts. The authority of experts draws further sustenance from and meaningfully contrasts with the cultural conflation of femininity with pathology (Code, 1991, pp. 203–219).

For a few years I’ve been struggling to engage the feminist critiques of science, medicine, and technology with accounts of how expertise operates in argumentation. However, the current analysis of ad verecundiam arguments ignores forms of authority that intersect with expertise, and argumentation theorists in general assume equal social status among interlocutors and thus seem oblivious to the principles of feminist analysis. The contemporary focus on expertise in accounts of the fallacy of appeal to authority suggests that other forms of authority are no longer important or problematic. Fortunately, authority receives more complex
analysis from the rhetoricians in the field. Jean Goodwin has opened up the discussion of authority to provide greater attention to the role of social status, looking back to its significance for the Roman orator Cicero (2001), and noting its centrality to John Locke’s introduction of the term \textit{ad verecundiam}.

Expertise has become increasingly possible as our society develops more forms of specialized labour and forms of knowledge to support that diversification. The transition from hierarchies of religion and aristocracy, such as in ancient Rome, to hierarchies influenced more by specialized knowledge has many implications for individual reasoning and argumentation. The intertwining of social hierarchies plays only a limited role in Goodwin’s account of expertise as a principle-agent problem but her model opens up many social considerations. The trust that she recognizes to underpin expertise is subject to exploitation in a way that demands attention to hierarchical intersections, including gender, race, and class hierarchies.

2. EXPERTISE AND THE DIVISION OF LABOR

In contemporary scholarly contexts, the term “authority” often refers almost exclusively to expertise, also referred to as “epistemic” and sometimes “cognitive” authority, leaving behind the authorities of dignity and command recognized by Locke and Richard Whately, and the ordinary language of “calling in the authorities” to indicate the need for policing and regulation. Arguments that appeal to expertise have extensive company among forms of defeasible or presumptive reasoning. Other “schemes” for presumptive argumentation include \textit{ad verecundiam}’s Lockean sisters \textit{ad hominem} and \textit{ad ignorantiam} but extend far beyond. A good deal if not all of reasoning and argumentation can be understood in this fashion, as dependent on defeasible inference patterns. However, expertise and appeals to it—good and bad—also depend on contingent social structures. Expertise functions in much the same way as other forms of authority, and it rests on the same foundations as the authorities of command and dignity, on social structures and status within them. Social diversification provides the need for expertise and resources for the education that provides the knowledge.

Recognizing expertise as a specialized form of authority does not reduce it in any simple fashion to status, but indicates how status makes expertise possible. Sometimes our expertise may account only for artefacts of social structures, such as when directory assistance provides phone numbers or information staff in an airport or shopping mall provide directions for the space. Experts also guide us regarding non-social phenomena, but we need not get into debates over realism to say that social structures make possible the \textit{types} of engagement in the physical world that allow a person to become, say, a physicist or an engineer. Developing these specializations depends on technologies, schools, and professional associations, as well as on teaching and mentoring.

Reliance on expertise has increased in recent centuries as the division of epistemic labour brings with it the division of epistemic authority (Anderson, 1995, p. 59; Code, 1995, p. 175). We have no more polymaths; we cannot ‘have it all’ epistemically regardless of wealth, and much of our knowledge has become esoteric.

A layperson defers to the authority of experts, not because in so doing one is guaranteed the truth-of-the-matter, but because one lacks the means to determine the issue oneself. In deferring to experts, one is not deferring simply to particular knowledge claims, but to a process for making those claims. (Pierson, 1995, p. 402)
In democracies, especially those based on representation, processes and documents as much as people hold and convey authority, moving away from the personal authority of aristocracy, which was more important in Rome than any other authority.

Despite the Roman pride in their legal expertise, despite their pride in their military discipline, auctoritas was their preferred method of social control. Thus it is notorious that in Republican times there were no police within the city limits of Rome; order was maintained instead by an often symbolic display of personal dignity. (Goodwin, 1998, p. 277).

As sources of authority can become disembodied, moving beyond individual humans, they can rematerialize in such things as timetables (Walton, 1997), academic disciplines and methods (Hundleby, 2010), and even web sites. The division of cognitive labour and the proliferation of forms of expertise give expertise a systematic nature.

Specialization and correspondingly accreditation have proliferated with the growth of science and technology, in turn encouraging the development of education as an industry. Training has long been a prerequisite for the authority of command, but the demand for education has increased such that we have training for pretty much every job or vocation. While experience may sometimes substitute for education and accreditation in seeking a position of authority, training has become the gold standard because it guarantees a degree of expertise; we even have a distinct sector to the workforce described as “information technology.” Education has become an industry in its own right, supported not only by governments and private endowments but by profit.

3. FORMS OF AUTHORITY

To distinguish among different types of authority Goodwin (1998) looks at the forms of corresponding recourse for not following authority. Refusal to defer to dignity by exhibiting reverence amounts to impudence and invites shame; refusal of command is disobedient and risks loss of position or punishment; while refusal of expertise is imprudent and risks loss of resources, including the willingness of others to cooperate. These forms of authority intertwine in ways that aid the functioning of expertise. They connect to each other by social networks more general than and underpinning the systems that provide dignity. Such prestige is merely an especially high form of social status, I suggest, that in specific forms also includes the authority of command.

Goodwin argues that the types can be clearly distinguished despite how they compound and complement each other: “Authorities, like other goods, are often distributed on the principle that to those who have shall be given more” (1998, p. 273). So, those who are learned are given the authority of command and those who are able to wield command are granted status to support it. Goodwin maintains nonetheless that refusal to any authority reflects clear delineation among the three forms. So, for example, “the student history paper which is not typed as required is disobedient, the student history paper contradicting the instructor on a date, imprudent.” (1998, p. 273)

That infringements of authority can sometimes be specifically diagnosed does not entail that forms of authority often operate independently. In particular, a degree of expertise

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1 The taxonomy is summarized in Hansen (2006), p. 323.
belongs to all forms of authority. A senator knows how to behave like sensor, which many do not, and any officer has technical understanding about protocol.

The diversification of labour gives expertise such an important role in our society that we accord experts an elevated status—titles, good salaries, and general influence—that makes their authority complex, involving other forms. A person may be esteemed and granted significant prestige because of his knowledge or for that same expertise he may receive an administrative position and the power of command. An elevated position of some kind helps to mark expertise, and can also aid in its operation. Among experts, we prefer a plumber who can also order the materials for her recommended options, and a midwife to whom physicians will listen. Their authorities of command and dignity, respectively, are not specifically epistemic aspects of their power or not intrinsically matters of expertise but nonetheless contribute to their status and function as experts. Complementary forms of authority increase the relevance of an expert’s knowledge.

3. DIGNITY AND BIAS

Dignity may seem to be old-fashioned, mostly obsolete. Even if it once influenced other forms of authority, many of us like to think we can accord someone dignity without believing what the dignitary says. However, recent work in the psychology of bias suggests differently: prestige can have a profound effect on people’s evaluation and proper comportment can influence behaviours, decisions, and beliefs that seem independent of courtesy. Perceived social status is basic and remains standard, even generic to our engagement with other people. It certainly affects discursive authority in the sense of who gets to speak and who is heard; these elements of testimony are important for argumentation and public reasoning, and hence for expertise.

Dignity like command does not operate generically but provides exceptional status, say belonging to a religious figure or hero. Yet both connect from broader forms of authority and they are related to each other as forms of high regard. The status of dignity operates more loosely than the status of command and also has a more subtle influence. Fulfilling the obligations of etiquette often is more subject to interpretation than following an order. The authority of command is treated together with other social authorities by Douglas Walton (1997). His terminology of “administrative authority” might encompass dignity too, but it assumes a formality to social authority less common and less acceptable in democracies than in aristocracies.

Hierarchical distinctions that are important to reasoning in discursive contexts can be quite broad, operating generically; they need not grant exceptional status in the manner of the prestige providing for command or traditional dignity. The commonplace social ranks follow lines of race, class, and gender. Biases against people with lower social status and for people with higher social status are part of status quo bias which outweighs in-group preference. Thus white people tend to be perceived as generally good by the overwhelming majority of North Americans taking the implicit association test or IAT (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/), regardless of the tester’s own racial identity and political views on race. No matter how opposed to racism one is one may show these unconscious biases (Jost, Mahzarin, & Nosek, 2004). Likewise, my decades of work on feminist research and identification as a “career woman” do not prevent me from testing with a moderate bias against associating women with careers. Bias against women in careers and in science is common across cultures.
and identities. More specific social evidence of these biases has been available for decades from studies of job and tenancy applications, for instance, revolutionizing some interview practices such as for orchestras. They now use screens to blind auditions and as a result employ many more women than before. Likewise, to be fair to our students we must view their work as anonymously as possible when evaluating it.

Despite our romanticism about the equalitarian nature of democracy, broad contemporary social categories relate closely to traditional dignity. We accord people with something-like-dignity in ways that we often do not recognize but that can have profound effects. Ordinary social divisions cumulatively may accord a level of status reminiscent of a Roman senator’s dignity. Admittedly, white, middle-class, straight men are not elevated so much as they are taken to be standard, but that is the ideal position in a democracy, analogous to classical dignity. What is typical (in some sense) and viewed as being usual is also considered ideal. The rest of us have relatively compromised status (although some white, middle-class, straight young men face other forms of marginalization).

Trust operates implicitly in democratically tolerated forms of oppression. We adhere more strictly to gendered and raced behaviour in strange environments because maximizing our predictability helps us work with others. People become extremely confused and even unable to think and act in the face of indeterminate gender and sometimes for indeterminate race and age. We can better anticipate the behaviour of individuals whom we can locate along these axes (Ridgeway, 2011). We trust our social presumptions and that other people will conform to them; others do conform because they are trying to negotiate a world structured by the same roles. Consider that women and people of colour smile more than white men; it’s typical of subordinates, stereotypical, and can be a reliable way to minimize social hindrances but it is a burden and creates an unequal discursive environment.

The social status that adheres when one is on the beneficiary side of lines of oppression thus can be understood as a generic form of authority. However modest this dignity it can sometimes amounts to the authority of command via its testimonial effects. Statements from white men carry weight; statements made by people of colour carry less, even among those sharing their ethnicity; women tend to be interrupted more than men even by other women. A man can be proud to be a man, in a way that people can rarely be proud of anything else except other dominant social statuses. Although it may be unacceptable in many contexts to appeal directly to one’s masculinity, standards for politeness are gender-specific, demanding assertiveness from men and supporting roles from women and people of colour. The dynamics of compound privileges can also make the elevation to one’s status consistent and resilient.

The prestige is merely less explicit than the traditional authority of dignity, and people are less conscious of its operation.

4. POWER, TRUST AND EXPERTISE

Violence and other forms of power lack the trust characteristic of authority (Goodwin, 2001, p. 51). “The kind of authority that is everywhere and always open to challenge is . . . no authority at all” (Hanrahan & Anthony, 2005, p. 64) and so authority is the place where explanation, at least provisionally, stops. While good authority is in principle subject to scrutiny, in practice I must trust you to a degree if I have you take on any task for me, whatever that task might be: shovelling snow or diagnosing my headaches. Our trust in experts may be engendered and secured in various ways: I can oversee and note the impact of your work or advice, but the
trustworthiness of experts is distinctly difficult to assess. The power of expertise can be evaluated and challenged, as feminist critiques of medicine show, and there may be increasing need to seek out such challenges.

What qualifies experts is that they have epistemic skills we lack, abilities to examine and understand. Experts hold power not only by way of complementary authorities for command and dignity; they make certain courses of action possible by giving novices instruction and confidence, opening up the recommended paths and making other choices more awkward (Goodwin, 2001, p. 50).

Expertise is notoriously difficult to assess. Like many of us, I cannot judge well the quality of work done by a plumber in the way I can the mowing of a lawn. Or to bring back the medical case, I can judge skill in bandaging but not in delivering a baby. Those physicians who specialize sometimes do so because of their inept bedside manner, so that my attempt to judge a physician’s expertise based on his apparent ease may be systematically mistaken. On the other hand experts cannot judge other true experts if their skills are so close that they overlap, Alvin Goldman (2011) argues.

Because the ability of the putative expert to serve our needs cannot be adequately scrutinized and evaluated, it is difficult to justify our trust. The more we can oversee the less we need to trust. The problem is akin to the Euthyphro dilemma: Do we trust experts because they have cognitive authority or do they have cognitive authority because we trust them? In causal sequence our trust gives people cognitive authority in the sense of licensing them to investigate and advise; but ideally we come to trust people because they have cognitive authority in the sense of understanding, demonstrated already to some degree.

In the cases of medicine usurping midwifery and trials based on male subjects only, the putative experts did not deserve trust. Trust seems to have derived from social privilege, especially the gender and class status, an analysis that shows how other privileges of any kind involve trust that can be exploited to acquire expert status. The opacity of expertise may make it especially vulnerable to confusion with other forms of authority. Expertise may be especially compromised in technological democracies given the insidious nature of social status and rendering expertise especially in need of critique.

5. TRUST

An analysis of the ways that expertise goes wrong and trust is violated requires attention beyond the individuals in the exchange. It takes us back to the division of labour in which expertise is just one form of authority, one among several ways in which we entrust people. The more official this trust, the more likely that the trust is recognized to depend on authority, yet I have suggested that dignity operates in subtle but powerful ways. Gender and race have the company of more official institutions that have more transparent guarantees of expert services, and more trustworthy sources for the authority of individual experts. Just as official institutions encourage us to trust some people as experts, social institutions likewise affect who receives expert credibility, authorizing and deauthorizing both individuals and whole traditions.

To solve the apparent dilemma of expertise and provide a basis for trust Goodwin suggests a model of individual exchange. “Someone—the "principal"—needs to retain someone else—an "agent"—to do something she cannot or does not want to do for herself”
An individual expert *stakes her dignity* on the correctness of her claims.

In appealing to authority, the speaker offers her dignity as a hostage for her judgment, wagers it on her judgment, or, to use another analogy, posts it as a bond guaranteeing the correctness of her judgment. (Goodwin 2001, p. 51)

Because of this stake, trust is not just given but earned, Goodwin argues (2001). The principle becomes empowered by expert advice insofar as being granted with the power to *challenge the status* of the expert. A physician can be shown to have provided a misdiagnosis, a teacher a false set of information, and such risk accrues to all offers of expertise. The expert has been authorized to perform a certain sort of labour and that authorization can be retracted, by the principle or the monitoring body, she suggests. The risk taken by experts depends on their self-presentation and the risk of appearing fraudulent and thus provides a reputational bond. Credentials are guarantees of expertise only insofar as they guarantee good behaviour: the licensing body may respond and there are other systems of accountability. Likewise, contributors on webpages may be trusted not because we know who they are (and sometimes especially because of their anonymity which can encourage honesty). Whether we trust them depends on the structure of the web site and the standards it follows. Online personas are sometimes carefully cultivated in ways well deserving of trust (Goodwin, 2011).

Goodwin’s principle-agent model thus demands we are not alone in our relationships with experts, yet monitoring bodies are not adequate support for trust among individuals. Neither the risk of adverse selection or the hazard of individual immorality or irresponsibility can account for the exploitation of women by the medical industry, how a whole expert profession can perpetrate an injustice and falsehood. As Code explains:

> The rhetoric of voluntary agreement cannot account for the politics of trusting . . . Trust-based relationships lend themselves readily to the forms of exploitation to which women of all classes, races, ages, and persuasions have long been subject. (1991, pp. 184–185)

A political account of trust can be found in social contract theories from Plato through Hobbes, Locke, and Rawls. Recently Miranda Fricker (1998) uses it to indicate the fundamental nature of testimonial authority to our social means of understanding, and Charles Mills (1997) shows how exploitative it can be, arguing that the social order of Western democracies rests on the exploitation of people of colour.

Goodwin suggests that we scholars need to attend to the specific techniques used to develop trust, a piece of advice that directs us to social contracts operating in the background:

> Where [the principle] may not have experience with this physician, for example, she does have experience with the medical system as a whole; and if her experience is good, she has some reason for confidence in the judgments of the Board of Medical Examiners and other professional organizations. (Goodwin, 2010, p. 141)

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2 Code suggests the general epistemological model of friendship, which is as individualist as Goodwin’s. I am not sure how Code has developed her account of trust in her most recent work (2006) but a word search of it suggests that she has left behind “friendship” as the model.
The larger structures of authority that set the stage for novices to engage expert authorities include structures that give rise to the authorities of dignity and command; we must beware their effects, both beneficial and pernicious.

6. CONCLUSION

Our ability to judge trustworthiness itself needs to become specialized to fit our age of expertise. The opacity of expertise renders it especially vulnerable to confusion with other forms of authority, and thus to exploitation in the service of other forms of power, such as gender, race, and class privilege. Goodwin argues that we escape the dilemma of judging the authority of experts by way of our ability to judge general trustworthiness (2010, p. 141). Her strategy is on the right track but stops short. Some of our ability to judge is pervaded by systems of social authority. We have distinct reasons to trust experts that do not hold for other authorities, but these do not ease the problem.

The motivations people have for becoming experts will include those for becoming authorities of any kind, such as an ambitious disposition (‘I climbed it because it was there’), the desire for power or personal gain, the intention to do good, the invigoration of competition, and the desire to contribute to society. More specific purposes will attract people to expertise as a form of authority over others, such as the love of learning, the desire to understand something in particular, and the intention to contribute to social knowledge. These more specialized motivations seem less vulnerable to corruption than those driving authority in general. Certainly expertise can make one more able to be a trickster and a con artist, but those do not rank highly among long-term personal ambitions. Should one have expertise in psychology or rhetoric and apply it to merchandising, there obtains a sense that one has “sold out” relative to other experts.

Nevertheless, expertise will attract those seeking obscure power; it is intrinsically ripe for corruption; and the implicit authority granted according to the status quo may mask poor excuses for expertise. Institutions that govern professions and practices may not be sufficient deterrent, and themselves engrained in the existing systems of power. Status quo thinking operates as the default. To scrutinize the politics of expertise requires special effort and attention to liberatory analysis and critiques.

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