



DFG-Graduiertenkolleg GRK 2073  
*Integrating Ethics and Epistemology of Scientific Research*

The Research Training Group 2073 *Integrating Ethics and Epistemology of Scientific Research* (Leibniz Universität Hannover/Bielefeld University) invites to a public guest lecture.

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# Integrating Evidence and Expertise: An Epistemological and Practical Problem

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Universität Bielefeld

Department of Philosophy

Room X-B2-103



## Integrating Evidence and Expertise: An Epistemological and Practical Problem

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### Abstract

As social animals, humans typically rely on others to do things for them. In exchange, they usually accept that they will have to do things for others as well. So the baker may provide bread to the banker, while the banker administers the baker's finances. Both of them will probably live in houses built by the mason, while the mason received both bread and financial help from the baker and the banker. Reliance on one another among humans is both material and intellectual. We rely on one another for things we need, but we also rely on one another for information. Reliance on information and knowledge from experts is a special kind of mutual epistemic support among humans: we rely on those whom we think are epistemically better placed than us on a certain subject. We usually call 'experts' those who have excellent skills at a given task, or in a given field. These are usually people who have gained the experience and competence we lack through training and personal capacities.

'Expert' is a relative term. It is relative to a layperson. In this chapter we are mostly interested in epistemic experts and epistemic laypeople. Epistemic experts (just 'experts', henceforth) are people who are in a superior epistemic position with respect to a group of laypeople. They may be in such a position as a result of superior cognitive abilities, more extended training, greater learning, or simply because of the contingencies of their epistemic status, for example when a witness can testify with their first-hand experience about a murder.

Some epistemologists have claimed that reliance on experts is ubiquitous. Elizabeth Fricker (2006), claims that without epistemic reliance on others we could not trust electricians to wire our home, or doctors to prescribe a medicine for us. Similarly, John Hardwig (1991) portrays a picture of science in which scientists doing research have to constantly rely on the innumerable theses, proofs, and instrumental facts already established by other scientists.

In science, experts are usually those who have achieved a high level of competence and experience in their own field. Expertise is typically disciplinary and often sub-disciplinary; but it can also be found outside disciplinary boundaries (see Collins and Evans 2002). Whether there can be interdisciplinary expertise is a matter of debate, but there can be expertise in communicating between disciplines (see Collins and Evans 2008).

Imagine the following situation, in which most people have probably occasionally found themselves: We start feeling a pain in our body; we are looking for a solution to the problem and we would like to know what causes the pain and what could be done about it. The first question we might ask is "can we find the information we seek ourselves, or should we rely on someone else?" The ease with which we usually do not pay much mind to such a question, and with which we immediately assume that, when in pain, we ought to seek help, is revealing of how pressing the question is in a number of less common circumstances. Firstly, it is not always the case that we can rely on someone else; for instance, doctors are not always



available in some parts of the world. Secondly, when it comes to more arcane fields of knowledge, there may not be recognized expertise in that field. In those two cases just mentioned, and in many more, the question "can we gain knowledge from someone else, or should we instead seek knowledge by our own means?" is a pressing one.

But let us assume that, from time to time, we can and ought to seek knowledge from others. Even then, a second problem is likely to arise: How do we know who is and who is not an expert, say, in pain matters? This question is not as easily dismissed as the one we asked before; if only, because frauds and impostors are numerous, and compete for authority in all fields of knowledge. Even in the relatively unproblematic field of medical knowledge we still need to know that doctors are usually more qualified than spiritual healers or voodoo priests in pain matters. A further problem is that we may be able to recognize the general field of expertise, but be unable to discriminate among competing experts in the same field: To stick with the example at hand (pain), the problem may arise when a physiotherapist gives us advice that conflicts with other information we have received from a surgeon. Telling experts apart from laypeople, and judging among experts, are problems that we are likely to encounter in a wide range of situations, and not just interesting philosophical puzzles.

We can then formulate the three questions that will lead the next sections of this chapter. These are key epistemological questions about expertise.

- 1) Can we gain knowledge from experts?
- 2) How do we recognize experts?
- 3) Is there private expertise? Is expertise possessed individually, or is it a relational property?