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### Commentary on Arguments from Expert Opinion and Persistent Bias

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# Commentary on “Arguments from Expert Opinion and Persistent Bias”

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## 1. Arguments from authority

In standard textbook discussions of inductive argument forms (e.g., Bassham *et al.*, 2013) arguments from authority are defined in the following way. They are arguments in which an arguer has offered as support for her conclusion at least one premise that makes reference to the testimony of someone who is an authority with respect to the probable truth of a fact that, if true, would serve to support the arguer’s conclusion. Depending on the kind of fact that is needed and the kind of conclusion an arguer is trying to establish, the authority possessed by the individual cited in such an argument can come from one of two sources. It can come from the fact that the individual being cited is an eyewitness to a series of events that, if they occurred as described, would make the arguer’s conclusion more probable. Or it can derive from the fact that the individual being cited is an expert in an area of study or practice from which the premise that is needed to make the arguer’s conclusion more probable can be established. An example of the former might include an argument in which the arguer cites the first-person accounts of those maltreated in a prison system in order to reach the conclusion that probably abuse that has been described in that way has occurred. Examples of the latter might include an argument in which the arguer cites the statements of a paleontologist in order to support the claim that birds are essentially a kind of dinosaur or an argument in which the arguer cites the statements of an astrophysicist in order to support the claim that there really are such things as gravity waves.

In standard textbook treatments of this kind, the sections that deal with arguments from authority are also invariably hedged about with a variety of cautions and provisos regarding their use. In the case of eyewitness authority there are warnings regarding the competence of eyewitnesses. Is there reason to believe that the individual whose testimony was cited was likely not in the place that she needed to be in order to be an eyewitness? If not, then do we have any reason to believe that this person lacked the perceptual or intellectual capacity to witness that which she claims to have? In the case of arguments that rely upon expert authority, similar warnings are issued, though they are more nuanced and complex. Yes, it may well be the case that so-and-so is an authority in a particular area of expertise. But that won’t mean much if she is speaking on a matter unrelated to that area of expertise. Nor will it mean much if the matter is not something on which someone can be an expert (e.g., Bassham *et al.*, 2013, pp. 140-144).

Significantly, in her textbook, Govier (2014) goes one step further. She advises arguers to avoid citing the authority of an expert in an argument if the matter on which that expert has been cited is something that is contentious within that expert’s field of expertise: on which, in other words, there does not at present exist a professional consensus. As she puts it:

Even within fields where qualified experts share background beliefs, they may differ on particular issues. Consider, for instance, the area of child development.

Some experts believe that children do not acquire abstract logical concepts until their early teens, whereas others think that they acquire such concepts as early as six or eight years of age. In the face of this sort of disagreement, you cannot justify accepting one claim or the other simply by appealing to some expert, because the experts disagree with each other. Anyone who disputed your claim could just find another expert and argue against you by citing that person. Defending a claim on the basis of authority is appropriate only if experts in the area generally agree about it. (Govier, 2014, p. 125)

On a Govier-style understanding of expert authority, therefore, it would seem that an argument that relies upon such authority will only be a genuine argument from authority, as opposed to a fallacious (or inappropriate) appeal to authority, if it has two features not explicitly mentioned in these other accounts. Such an argument must, first of all, involve the introduction through one or more of its premises of what is taken to be a consensus within the area of expertise that is being appealed to by the arguer; and, secondly, due to this prior constraint, it must also involve the introduction of what is at most a sample authority: that is, one whose testimony as to the existence and nature of this consensus would most properly be described in terms of their having simply relayed the facts relative to this matter—*via* the arguer—to the argument's recipients.

## 2. Arguments from expert opinion

Construed in this way, arguments from expert authority seem very different, therefore, from what our speaker is talking about today. What Dr. Mizrahi has in his sights are arguments from expert opinion. These seem to involve something like the following. There is an area of expertise in which some individual is reckoned to be an authority. There is also an arguer who wishes to use the expertise of this individual to support a claim that the arguer wishes to make. And so the arguer finds an instance of that individual's testimony that will serve this purpose. But rather than find an instance that merely relays, in a somewhat anodyne manner, the professional consensus in the area of expertise in which the individual cited is an authority, the arguer finds instead an instance in which the authority cited relies upon her knowledge base and professional training to make a further, independent judgement about some expertise-related but non-consensus matter—in which, in other words, the authority, relying upon her professional expertise, attempts to add to the world some new piece of knowledge based upon an individual, professionally-informed judgement call.

Examples of this sort of argument are easy to imagine. Presumably they would include an argument in which the arguer cites the predictions made by a specialist in international diplomacy to support a claim regarding the future of Sino-Japanese relations or an argument in which an arguer cites the predictions made by a specialist in climate science to support a claim regarding the year in which New York City will finally sink beneath the waves. And it is easy to see why one might confuse arguments of the one kind with arguments of the other. They both involve relying upon an individual who is using her expertise in an area relevant to that expertise. And they both involve providing an authoritative statement on a question that could, at least potentially, be settled within the area of expertise in question.

As we have seen, however, Mizrahi is not happy with arguments of the latter kind; and it is not hard to see why. Even before considering the evidence that he has provided us with, there seems to be something inherently dicey in the idea of trusting an authority on a matter that is

both important enough to require the voice of an expert but debatable enough that there has yet to develop in that authority's area of expertise any sort of professional consensus. Indeed, it was concern over precisely this sort of situation that prompted Govier to restrict legitimate arguments from authority to those in which a general professional consensus is being relayed. Confronted with a situation in which no such consensus exists, Govier would probably agree with Mizrahi and counsel that the preferred path is for the arguer to simply reproduce the argument of the expert who has proffered her opinion. The alternative is to provoke in the argument's addressees and respondents a game of dueling experts, which would only serve to undermine the value of the premise or premises expressing the judgement of the original expert authority.

But then, of course, there is also the evidence; which, as Mizrahi points out, seems to suggest that experts in a variety of fields are no better than anyone else in managing to escape the various cognitive sins that flesh is heir to. Experts have been shown to be overconfident; they have been shown to suffer from confirmation bias; and they have been shown to engage in a decision-making process called "anchoring", in which one re-jiggers the character of one's starting point in order to produce the outcome that one antecedently desires. When it comes to individuals applying the expertise that they have acquired, they are not what Mizrahi would call reliable. As he puts it: "not only do experts fall prey to pretty much the same kinds of cognitive biases that novices fall prey to, they also tend to use the sort of unreliable decision heuristics that novices typically use."

### **3. Questions regarding further research**

As Mizrahi notes, many of those who have engaged with his views on this topic in the past have been moved to dismiss them on the basis of their being premised upon a set of ultimately self-defeating claims. It may or may not comfort him to know that I am not among those who see his views in this way. The example of Govier, I think, demonstrates that the question he is asking is a valid one, so long as we distinguish between what is known collectively in a field of expertise and what is being independently proposed through an expert's individual judgement call. But I think that his general research program makes sense as well. Indeed, when it comes to the question of speaker reliability, I have spent much of my own professional life focusing on similar sorts of issues. I have, for example, directly engaged with the empirical evidence that has been offered in favor of such claims as "you can't believe what you read on the internet" and "gay kids always lie about their experiences" (Fields, 2007; 2009). The idea that a class of speakers might be largely unreliable when it comes to certain topics—and demonstrably so—does not seem to me to be an impossibility nor to involve necessarily the rejection of the idea that testimony in general ought to be treated as credible until proven otherwise.

As such, what I would like to offer at this point are some questions regarding further research. For I am afraid that the most destructive criticism that might be offered by someone who was in sympathy with Mizrahi's approach would be something like the following: that the data that he has provided to support his claim is not sufficiently broad in its scope and, therefore, that his overall claim may not be sufficiently well-supported. Specifically, I wonder: are there types of expertise where judgement calls are relatively more well-founded than in others? The majority of his examples focus on situations where a standard of practice is being applied within the context of a work life, where many, many decisions are being quickly made and on a daily basis (e.g., policing, law, medicine, software engineering, and securities analysis). The one exception is philosophy, a notably (perhaps even scandalously) open-ended area of academic

expertise. Would similar results obtain in an area of expertise that was less open-ended (say, physics, chemistry, or climatology) or on a matter that was considerably more disconnected from one's day-to-day work life and upon which one might have more leisure time to reflect? While of course the issue of conflict among experts on non-consensus matters can come up anywhere, it might well be the case that not all expert opinions are equally unreliable due to the problem of cognitive bias. There could, of course, be just as much cognitive bias in the words of an exobiologist hazarding a guess on the likelihood of life on Europa as in the opinions of a judge analyzing legal vignettes. But there could also be less. The problem is that we can't tell from the level and type of evidence at hand which is which; and thus, strictly speaking, the evidence provided, while suggestive, does not seem to produce the conclusion.

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