EXPERTS: WHAT THEY ARE
AND HOW WE RECOGNIZE THEM—
A DISCUSSION OF ALVIN GOLDMAN’S VIEWS

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Summary
What are experts? Are there only experts in a subjective sense or are there also experts in an objective sense? And how, if at all, may non-experts recognize experts in an objective sense? In this paper, I approach these important questions by discussing Alvin I. Goldman’s thoughts about how to define objective epistemic authority and about how non-experts are able to identify experts. I argue that a multiple epistemic desiderata approach is superior to Goldman’s purely veritistic approach.

1. Introduction

What are experts? Are there only experts in a subjective or recognitional sense or are there also experts in an objective sense? And how, if at all, may non-experts recognize experts in an objective sense?¹

In this paper, I approach these questions by discussing Alvin I. Goldman’s thoughts about expertise. I focus on two important contributions of his: (1) the section on Recognizing authority in Chapter 8 of Knowledge in a Social World (1999)² and (2) the more recent essay “Experts: Which

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² Goldman’s book Knowledge in a Social World (1999) is an essay in social epistemology with applications in various fields. Although Chapter 8, Section 12 contains the main treatment of expert recognition, KSW has several passages on related topics: pp. 123ff. (on estimating testimonial likelihoods); 150ff. (on arguments from authority); 174–182 (on peer review); 226–229 (on authority in science); 305–311 (on expert witnesses in litigation); 334ff. (on political authorities); 363–367 (on the student-teacher relationship) and 367–372 (on textbooks and other curricular...
Ones Should You Trust?” (2001).³

The phenomenon of expertise is a special case of the general social phenomenon that each of us depends on other persons, that we do not severally suffice for our own needs, but each of us needs many things, especially many other persons as helpers, as Plato put it (Republic 369b6–7). Here, we are concerned with epistemic dependence. Besides symmetric forms of epistemic dependence⁴, there are asymmetric forms of epistemic dependence: relationships of layperson to expert (e.g. patient-doctor), or novice to expert (e.g. pupil-teacher; student-professor).

No one can deny that we all depend in countless ways on experts. The ubiquity of asymmetric epistemic dependence is especially obvious in modern societies with a high degree of division of labour and specialization, but it has been part of the human condition at least since antiquity. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the nature and value of expertise is a major theme already in Socrates’ teaching and in Plato’s dialogues (cf. Gentzler 1995, LaBarge 1997 and 2005).

Our dependence on experts raises epistemological, ethical and political questions (cf. Selinger/Crease (eds.) 2006, 4f.). Like Goldman, I will focus on the epistemological concerns. From this point of view, the topic of expertise is closely related to the topic of testimony. Indeed, the problem of identifying and evaluating expert testimony is a special case of the general epistemological problem of testimony and trust—to be sure, a very acute case (cf. Goldman 2001, 85–89; idem 2002, x). As should be clear, our topic is not only of theoretical interest; it is of urgent practical importance.

³ “Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?” (2001) is an essay in applied social epistemology. It has already been reprinted twice, namely in (Goldman 2002a, 139–163 and in Selinger/Crease (eds.) 2006, 14–38)—Section 8 Identifying the Experts (16–19) of (Goldman 2006), contains a review of the highlights of (Goldman 2001).

⁴ E.g.: When I want to know how you are, I have to ask you; if you want to know how I am, you have to ask me.