

# WHAT IS AN EXPERT?

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**ABSTRACT.** Experts play an important role in society, but there has been little investigation about the nature of expertise. I argue that there are two kinds of experts: those whose expertise is a function of what they *know* (epistemic expertise), or what they *do* (performative expertise). Epistemic expertise is the capacity to provide strong justifications for a range of propositions in a domain, while performative expertise is the capacity to perform a skill well according to the rules and virtues of a practice. Both epistemic and performative experts may legitimately disagree with one another, and the two senses are conceptually and logically distinct.

*Key words:* epistemic expertise, expert, justification, nature of expertise, performative expertise, virtue

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Experts have a profound impact on the world. We defer to experts every day to inform us, give us advice, and help us to lead safer and healthier lives. Mechanical experts repair our automobiles and household appliances, musical experts entertain us, and the news media depend upon experts to provide credible reports to the public about scientific discoveries, political developments, and the like. (The word ‘expert’ is probably one of the most frequently used descriptors in the news.) Adjudication of civil and criminal lawsuits often requires testimony from expert witnesses, and scientific experts are developing a vaccine to prevent infection from the human immunodeficiency virus which is believed to cause AIDS. In short, the quality of our lives would be quite different without experts.

An investigation of expertise has intrinsic intellectual value, but since the work of experts often has important and far-reaching consequences in the world, such a study has practical implications as well. For example, experts in science decide “what methods should be accepted, which research directions appear most promising, which scientists should be selected for prominent positions and which should be consigned to oblivion” ([1], p. 120), and experts in policy analysis may affect the distribution of political power in society ([2], p. 6). An emerging literature in clinical ethics even refers to educators and consultants as

“ethics experts”.<sup>1</sup> Before considering the appropriateness of such social roles, it is necessary to examine the nature and scope of expertise. This article will be such an examination.

## 2. SOME PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

We speak of experts in family law, experts in AIDS, and experts about the works of Mozart. Expertise in this sense refers to knowledge *in* or *about* a particular field, and statements about it generally take the form, “S is an expert *in* or *about* domain D.” We also speak of expert violinists, expert mechanics, and expert surgeons. This second sense of expertise refers to domains of demonstrable skills, and statements about it generally take the form, “S is an expert *at* skill Q”.<sup>2</sup> There are thus at least two senses of expertise: an ‘epistemological’ sense<sup>3</sup> and a ‘performative’ sense.

Epistemic and performative expertise parallel the epistemological distinction between knowing *that* and knowing *how* ([9], pp. 25–61), and like those two forms of knowing, they are conceptually and logically distinct from one another. That is, to be an expert *at* skill Q does not imply that one can explain *how* one performs skill Q ([10], p. 62). We are acquainted with mathematical prodigies who are unable to explain how they perform their astonishing calculations or jugglers who cannot say precisely how they juggle. As Dustin Hoffman characterizes in the film *Rain Man*, autistic savants can perform highly complex intellectual feats like providing the correct number of toothpicks which fall on the floor in a large quantity, yet they are incapable of explaining how they do it, other than, “I see 246 toothpicks”.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, epistemic experts need not be able to perform the cognate skills well.

I wish to characterize three related concepts: ‘experts,’ ‘expert opinions’ (or ‘judgments,’ or ‘claims’), and ‘expertise’ as such. In this article, I will defend the following theses:

1. An individual is an expert in the ‘epistemic’ sense if and only if he or she is capable of offering strong justifications for a range of propositions in a domain.
2. An individual is an expert in the ‘performative’ sense if and only if he or she is able to perform a skill well.
3. A claim is an ‘expert opinion’ if and only if it is offered by an expert, the expert provides a strong justification for it, and the claim is in the domain of the expert’s expertise.