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Alvin Goldman on the Trust of Experts: Appraising Pathways to Rational Decision Making

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Abstract. This paper appraises pathways to rational decision making within the framework of Goldman's analysis of the trust of experts. In epistemology, knowledge from testimony has often been frown at as lacking the level of certainty associated with the traditional understanding of knowledge. This has led to testimonial scepticism: the idea that information receive from others is unreliable. However, the fact that practical challenges of life necessitate reliance on expert counsel creates a problem for rational decision making. In view of this, Alvin Goldman in his article titled "Experts: Which Ones You Should Trust?" exposes the dilemma a novice encounters when confronted with conflicting experts' advice on critical issues of life. He outlines five criteria that justify a novice's trust in a particular expert against the other(s). Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to ascertain whether one can ever be justified in believing an expert's testimony and what justifies the believe in that expert's testimony. In order to achieve its objective, the paper clarifies what it means to trust and who an expert is. It presents and examines Goldman's criteria for trusting experts to ascertain their credibility and sufficiency for rational decision making. Finally, it suggests an additional criterion to strengthen the novice trust in experts' counsel.

Keywords: Expert, Trust, Testimony, Novice, Testimonial Scepticism

1. Introduction

We cannot escape the necessity of relying on experts in various fields. By virtue of living in complex societies with extending divisions of labour, it is unavoidable that specialization plays increasingly substantial role in our decision-making. It is therefore necessary to consider this growing complexity and our reliance on expert judgment (Hardos 268).

The above quotation clearly captures the main objective of this paper which is to appraise the pathways to rational decision making in a complex world govern by experts' judgements. The ever-evolving nature of reality has transformed man into a relentless inquirer for knowledge in order to be cognitively at home with the state of things as this guarantees his chances for survival. And since reality proves to be a multifaceted phenomenon, the attempt to come to terms with it inadvertently becomes diverse. By so doing, human intellectual pursuit is compartmentalized and heavily characterized by division of labour and specialization. For this reason, individuals become experts in their chosen fields of study due to dedicated years of training and accumulated experience in the practice of the profession. Consequently, there has been an exponential growth of knowledge in human society to the extent that it is an imperative to trust experts to show us the way in different phases of human existential challenges. Trusting experts is therefore a necessity for individuals and society because they possess specialized knowledge and skills that allow them to make informed decisions and provide effective solutions in various domains of concern.

In view of the fact that relying on experts' counsel is an imperative in our highly complex societies, is it not instructive to be aware of situations where questioning their advice might be warranted? For instance, in the face of experts' expert disagreement, lack of transparency, conflict of experts' interests as well as uncertainties and complexities of the issues at hand, is it not crucial and necessary to question experts advise? In other words, since we must trust experts to survive, can we ever be justified in believing experts? Is the trust of experts anything more than a blind faith? These are the questions at the heart of testimonial scepticism: the philosophical position that questions the validity of knowledge gained through testimony or questions whether we can reliably acquire knowledge solely by accepting what someone else claims to be true. For instance, when a high school mathematics teacher, according to Rockwood, knows that a theorem in geometry is true because she has gone through the steps of the proof. She might then tell her students that

the theorem is true. If they believe her on the basis of her testimony, rather than going through the steps of the proof themselves, then they do not know the theorem is true; yet they would have a rationally justified belief because it is likely to be true given the teacher's testimony (www.iep.utm.edu). In this sense, the students' awareness of the truth of the theorem is simply a case of testimonial knowledge as they only know it to be true due to their faith in the expertise of their teacher. But, granted the scepticism surrounding knowledge by testimony, can one be justified in believing the testimony of an expert even if the testimony is wrong? Are there any criteria that a novice can depend on in making a justified decision based on the knowledge he or she gets from an expert? In effect, trust is risky, as such, the question of when it is warranted is of great importance. This paper therefore explores the possibility of making justified decisions in the face of the challenges inherent with testimonial knowledge within the purview of Alvin Goldman's analysis of the trust of experts.

1.1 What Does it Mean to Trust?

To trust is to have confidence that something is the case without evidence. The information we base our beliefs on, in this case, is often from a third party. In this sense, to trust is to believe that something you have been told is true or correct even though you do not have proof of it. It is the act of believing an information about something that we have no access to ourselves. We rely on the 'giver' of such information and believe that he or she is in a position to give us correct or authentic information.

1.2 Who is an Expert?

An expert is someone who has a specific skill or knowledge of a subject gained as a result of training or experience. The person is very knowledgeable about or skillful in a particular area of specialty. In other words, it is a person with extensive knowledge or ability in a given subject or area of study, or one who is regarded as such by others within the field. (Ibrahim et al, 129) This means that expertise is not all a matter of possessing accurate information; it includes a capacity or disposition to deploy or exploit this fund of information to form beliefs in true answers to new questions that may be posed in the domain. This arises from some set of skills or techniques that constitute part of what it is to be an expert (Goldman, 91). An expert goes beyond just being knowledgeable, he or she must understand how to utilize said knowledge to solve problems in the society. In addition, an expert is distinguished from a non-expert or novice by virtue of credential, training, education, profession, practice or experience.

2. Alvin Goldman on the Trust of Experts

Alvin Goldman's view on the trust of expert is formulated in a hypothetical situation where a novice is presented with two conflicting views by experts. The questions for Goldman are: which of the two experts should the novice trust? What reason can justify a novice's choice? Goldman wants to know if the choice of the novice is founded on anything other than what a writer calls Blind Faith. That is, believing in something without a rational justification. Goldman describes Hardwig as holding the view that a novice cannot be rationally justified in trusting an expert. In his words:

When a layperson relies on an expert, that reliance, says Hardwig, is necessarily blind. Hardwig is intent on deny- ing full-fledged skepticism; he holds that the receiver of testimony can acquire "knowledge" from a source. But by characterizing the receiver's knowledge as "blind", Hardwig seems to give us a skepticism of sorts. The term "blind" seems to imply that a layperson (or a scientist in a different field) cannot be rationally justified in trusting an expert. So, his approach would leave us with testimonial skepticism concerning rational justification, if not knowledge. (110)

However, Goldman observes further that Tyler Burge and Richard Foley, attempt to resolve the testimonial scepticism laden in trusting an expert by insisting that a lay person or novice ought to trust an expert except when there are stronger reasons not to do so. So, at first value, an assertion by an expert is true. According to him:

Burge, for example, endorses the following Acceptance Principle: "A person is entitled to accept as true some- thing that is presented as true and that is intelligible to him, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so"…Similarly, although Foley does not stress the a priori status of such principles, he agrees that it is reasonable of people to grant fundamental authority to the opinions of others, where this means that it is "reasonable for us to be influenced by others even when we have no special information indicating that they are reliable" (110).

Goldman is not convinced though about the acceptance principle of Burge or the fundamental authority of Folley. In the case where there are two experts with contradictory opinions about the same matter, the acceptance principle and the fundamental authority cannot be applied.in the case of two contrary opinions from experts, a novice has to choose one and Goldman thinks that there is certain fact about an

individual that can booster or defeat the novice's justification in accepting a testimony from an expert. For the testimony of others to be considered, Locke, for instance, gave certain conditions that should be considered. These are: 1. The number. 2. The integrity. 3. The skill of the witnesses. 4. The design of the author, where it is a testimony out of a book cited. 5. The consistency of the parts, and circumstances of the relation. (650). But for Goldman, the goal is to find empirical evidence the novice might have for believing one expert and not the other. Goldman listed five possible sources of evidence that a novice might have, for trusting one putative expert more than another. According to Goldman, these five sources are:

(A) Arguments presented by the contending experts to support their own views and critique their rivals' views.
(B) Agreement from additional putative experts on one side or other of the subject in question.
(C) Appraisals by "meta-experts" of the experts' expertise (including appraisals reflected in formal credentials earned by the experts).
(D) Evidence of the experts' interests and biases vis-a-vis the ques- tion at issue.
(E) Evidence of the experts' past "track-records" (116)

In the first case, a novice may generate evidence in support of the trust in an expert when arguments presented by the contending experts to support their own views and critique their rivals' views booster his confidence. This also goes along way according to Goldman in justifying the novice's choice. A novice of course, cannot understand the contents of the expert's arguments: the truth of the propositions or how the conclusion drawn follows logically from the premises presented, but a novice can have access to the way a particular expert defends his own views and also how he refutes the claims of the second expert. This is what Goldman calls indirect argumentative justification. The letter N in the following quotation stands for Novice. In his words:

The idea of indirect argumentative justification arises from the idea that one speaker in a debate may demonstrate dialectical superiority over the other, and this dialectical superiority might be a plausible indicator for N of greater expertise, even if it doesn't render N directly justified in believing the superior speaker's conclusion (117).

So, a novice, for Goldman, may be said to be justified in believing an expert E1 for instance, over expert E2, if the novice N notices that E1 is able to answer the questions of E2 to E2's satisfaction and also appear to refute E2's claims but E2 is unable to do same. Goldman cautions though that this does not automatically mean E1 is correct or a better expert. It may just mean he has a good debating skill.

In the second case, Goldman claims that a novice can appeal to the numbers of agreement from other experts and possible consensus reached among a large number of experts. This according to Goldman is important and should justify a person's belief in one expert and not the other. However, he states further that the question of numbers come in different forms: "There is a case where Expert 1 or E1 has more experts agreeing with his conclusions than there are experts agreeing with Expert2 or E2. Goldman wonders; Won't N be fully justified in trusting El over E2, if almost all other experts on the subject agree with E, or if even a preponderance of the other experts agree with El?" (119)

In the third case, Goldman holds that a novice may rightly appeal to the appraisals of meta-experts of the expert in question. Here, these experts do not have to directly agree with the findings of a particular expert, say expert 1, but they can vouch for him or her perhaps in terms of the scholarly achievements, formal credentials earned by the expert as well as professional affiliations. So, if more experts in a field vouch for Expert 1 than there are for Expert 2, then, the novice is justified in trusting Expert 1. In his words:

If one holds that a person's opinion deserves prima facie credence, despite the absence of any evidence of their reliability on the subject, then numbers would seem to be very weighty, at least in the absence of additional evidence. Each new testifier or opinion-holder on one side of the issue should add weight to that side. So a novice who is otherwise in the dark about the reliability of the various opinion-holders would seem driven to agree with the more numerous bodies of experts. Is that right? (120).

For Goldman, this is not always the case. The idea that an expert has more experts in his support would not in all cases justify a novice's decision to believe him. In order to substantiate this criticism, he raises the question of a guru with blind followers. According to him, the followers do not have an opinion of their own, they just follow whatever the guru says. There is also the possibility that instead of just one guru, there is a small group of elites (a small group of gurus) with certain beliefs, so everyone affiliated with that group will naturally accept what these opinion-makers decide. In his words:

First is the case of a guru with slavish followers. Whatever the guru believes is slavishly believed by his followers. They fix their opinions wholly and exclusively on the basis of their leader's views. Intellectually speaking, they are merely his clones. Or

consider a group of followers who are not led by a single leader but by a small elite of opinion-makers. When the opinion-makers agree, the mass of followers concur in their opinion. Shouldn't a novice consider this kind of scenario as a possibility?" (120).

It is important to note here that when each new expert agrees with one of the experts this should naturally boost the confidence of the novice especially in the case where the novice has course to believe that each new opinion from another expert is independent. Goldman however shows that in the case of the guru and the blind followers; the novice is not justified in believing the expert with more numbers of supporters. If an agent receives new evidence, the agent is expected to uprade his belief in a particular hypothesis. The evidence in question is the addition of experts. So, in a normal situation, a novice's belief should be more strengthened when two experts, say X and Y believe in a hypothesis than in a situation where only one expert is involved. Using the Bayelsian analysis, Goldman insists that it is not always the case. He points out scenerios where an extra putative expert's belief, let say Y should make no difference to the strength of the novice's belief. According to him, in cases where:

1. Expert Y is just a blind follower of X
2. Expert X and Y are part of a group that received instructions from a small elite group of opinion-makers.

Given the above, Goldman shows that the likelihood ratio when two putative experts believe in a hypothesis H, it is not always greater than the likelihood ratio when just one expert believes in H. In the formula below, (A) is the likelihood ratio when one putative expert X, believes the hypothesis H, while (B) is a likelihood ratio when two putative experts X and Y both believe H.

$$\frac{P(x(H)/H)}{P(x(H)/\sim H)}$$

$$\frac{P(x(H)\ \&\ Y(H)/H)}{P(x(H)\ \&\ Y(H)/\sim H)}$$

Goldman shows that B is not always greater than A. Now, according to probability calculus, B is equal to C. C being:

$$\frac{P(X(H)/H)\ P(Y(H)/X(H)\ \&\ H}{P(X(H)/\neg H)\ P(Y(H)/\ X(H)\ \&\neg H)}$$

Looking at formula (C) above and considering the case of a blind follower, it will mean that whatever X beliefs, Y will also belief regardless of the truth value of H. So, if a novice knows this, he will not be justified in believing H on the account of the extra expert Y believing H. This will imply that in cases where Y is just a blind follower of X or X and Y are just blind followers of a small group of opinion-makers, B can be reduced to A. So, in these cases, B = A as follows:

$$(B)\ \frac{P(x(H)\ \&\ Y(H)/H)}{P(x(H)\ \&\ Y(H)/\sim H)} = (A)\ \frac{P(x(H)/H)}{P(x(H)/\sim H)}$$

However, there are cases where one can be justified in following the numbers or where a novice can update his belief in a given hypothesis because of the number of experts. This is where B > A. This will be in cases where: Y is not a blind follower of X. That is:

1. Y believe's H not because of X
2. Y believe's H because he has gone through X's argument and independently come to his own conclusion.

The fourth case in Goldman's five basis of justification in a novice trust of expert is the case of interests and biases. A novice ought to consider the claim of an experts to see if the personal interests or biases of the expert lie behind such claims. On this case, as a test of expert performance in situations of conflict of interest, Goldman alludes to the results of a study published in the Journal of American Medical Association by Friedberg et al in 1999. In his words:

The study explored the relationship between published research reports on new oncology drugs that had been sponsored by pharmaceutical companies versus those that had been sponsored by nonprofit organizations. It found a statistically significant relationship between the funding source and the qualitative conclusions in the reports. Unfavorable conclusions were reached by 38% of non-profit-sponsored studies but by only 5% of pharmaceutical company-sponsored studies. (126).

There exist more practical examples of interests and biases in expert inquiry in our daily life. For instance, in situation of research for cancer drugs carried out by a pharmaceutical company that stands to make more money from people staying sick than actually getting cured, or an oil company sponsoring clean or alternative energy research. Furthermore, we can also see case of interests and biases in a situation in which a surgeon has a 'side hustle' of selling coffins. These considerations go a long way in defeating a novice's belief in an expert.

The fifth case put forward by Goldman is appealing to the past track records of an expert. This final category in our list may provide the novice's best source of evidence for making credible and rational choices. This is the use of putative experts' past track records of cognitive success to assess the likelihoods of their having correct answers to the current question (Goldman, 106). What a novice knows about an expert can booster or defeat his/her belief in the claims of an

expert. The expert could be one who is known to be right in matters in the past. On this basis, it is easy then to see how a novice may be justified in believing the expert.

3. Evaluation

As much as certainty is important in the quest for knowledge acquisition, we must come to terms with the fact that it will not always be possible to attain certainty, it is just a goal that we seek to attain. However, testimonial knowledge whether it could be rightly said to be a legitimate form of knowledge or not has not stop people from acting based on it. So, whether we like it or not we must trust another person's expertise. To wait to confirm before we act will be near impossibility. Trust is a part of knowledge acquisition. Goldman has however argued that whatever trust we have in an expert decision is not totally based on a blind faith. He explains further that one can be justified in believing what an expert says based on five conditions. As much as the conditions outlined by Goldman are not without possible weaknesses, it is important to note that they at least steer us away from testimonial dogmatism. In addition to the conditions given by Goldman, this paper suggests a possible sixth condition to strengthen the trust in an expert's counsel. This it calls the "Solomon's Test". It is the method the biblical King Solomon used to settle the dispute between two women each claiming to be the rightful mother of a child. According to the Bible:

And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it Then the king answered and said, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof. (1 Kings 3: 16-27)

The Solomon test as shown in the above places the risks in the hands of the expert and takes a decision from the reaction. In other words, if two experts are given the option of 'putting their money where their mouth is' when they predict an increase in value of a particular company stock in the next seven years with one willing to invest and the other not willing to invest. A novice will be justified in believing or have course to believe the expert who predicted an increase in value and willing to invests a huge sum of his own hard-earned money than the one who just predicted and fails to invest. This scenario is clearly cemented by C. S Lewis when he writes that "only a real risk tests the reality of a belief (11). Another example to illustrate this point is the coffee test. If an expert is trying to convince you that a particular cup of coffee is not poisoned, you will be more justified at least to believe him if he takes a sip from that cup than if he doesn't. it is however important to note that in as much as certainty is important in knowledge, it is not always a guaranty to achieve it. Although trusting in expert does not have to be based on some blind faith, even from the position of a novice, a person can still be justified in believing in an expert. Given the *Solomon's test,* it is possible to be mistaken as suicidal person would not mind drinking a poisoned cup of coffee, he may even have taken the antidote already, if he is certain you will take it if convinced by his act that it is not poisoned. In line with Goldman position, "this paper does not argue for flat-out scepticism in this domain; nor does it purport to resolve all pressures in the direction of scepticism. It is an exploratory paper, which tries to identify problems and examine some possible solutions, not to establish those solutions definitively" (109). In effect, this paper does not hold unto a particular view exclusively, however, in addition to Goldman's five conditions, it adds a sixth condition (the Solomon's Test) that steers us away from testimonial scepticism that seems to plague trust in experts.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to appraise the pathways to rational decision making within the framework of Alvin Goldman's analysis of the trust of experts. This objective was pursued with the clarification of what trust is as well as what an expert means. The paper then presents Goldman's view on the trust of experts outlining the five conditions that in his view could rationally justify the trust of the novice in an expert(s) counsel. These conditions are: indirect argumentative justification, agreement from additional putative experts, appraisal by meta-experts, evidence of experts' interests and biases and evidence the experts' past records. Based on this the paper argues that these conditions are necessary but requires a fortification by an additional condition. Thus, the paper suggests what it refers to as the "Solomon's Test" a method employed by the biblical King Solomon in placing the consequential risk in the hands of the expert in a bid to take decision from the reaction therein. The paper therefore concludes that a combination of these conditions serves as safe net to ensure a rationally compliant trust in the counsel of an expert.

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