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Think Interview: Trusting Experts and Authorities

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Abstract

We live at a time when experts are increasingly viewed with distrust. Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Gove famously said that 'The people of this country have had enough of experts.' In this interview, philosopher Linda Zagzebski explores some key questions concerning experts, including: What is an expert? How does an expert differ from an authority? And: What can we do to foster a healthier relationship between experts and non-experts?

Stephen Law (SL) What are epistemic authorities and why are they important? Is an expert the same thing as an authority?

Linda Zagzebski (LZ): In my book *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) I defined an epistemic authority as someone I realize knows better than I do how to get the truth in some field I am interested in. The field could be a scientific one or a practical one or maybe even a moral one. If I want to know how long ago our physical universe began, I will believe what the authorities in cosmological physics tell me because I have good reason to think that these people know something I do not know and I can learn from them. I learn from scientific and medical authorities and authorities on history. I also learn from practical authorities like plumbers and auto mechanics. If I know a very wise person, I might treat her as an authority on moral behaviour. In each case I adopt beliefs based on what I am told by an authority because the use of my own faculties tells me that I have limitations in my knowledge that they do not have. It is my trust in my own ability to tell when someone else can satisfy my need to know better than I can myself that makes me trust the authority. So trust in them is based on my trust in myself. If I did not accept the word of epistemic authorities, I would have very little knowledge, and I might even be harmed by my ignorance.

We live in a society that is very suspicious of authorities of any kind. This is no doubt a reaction to our history in which authority has so often been abused. The problem is that with authority comes power, and the motive to power has too often led to oppression. For that reason, we hardly ever talk about authorities anymore. But we do talk about experts. I think of an expert as a weak kind of epistemic authority. An expert is 'authority light'. The main difference is that there is an implied contract between authority and subject that is missing in the case of experts. Authorities agree to do their best to give me the

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truth I seek, and I agree to believe them when they fulfil the conditions for being an authority. If I believe them and it turns out that they are wrong, I have a right to complain and they owe me an explanation. The relationship between expert and lay person is weaker. Of course, I will complain if the expert lies to me, but if they are just mistaken, I will simply reject their expertise and go elsewhere. I cannot say that they violated an implicit agreement. So if you treat your physician or auto mechanic or history teacher as an expert rather than an epistemic authority, it is probably because you know you can always go to another doctor or another car mechanic or drop the class. If you think of them as epistemic authorities, you will probably stick with them because your trust in them is strong and you are willing to tell other people what they teach you. So experts and epistemic authorities have the same kind of social function, but we prefer the weaker category of experts because of our suspicion of authorities. However, that suspicion has recently extended to experts. Experts are under attack.

SL: What are the responsibilities of experts?

LZ: The relationship between experts and non-experts is crucial for the smooth functioning of society because we all need to get truths in many areas in order to act effectively and to make decisions based on the facts. Experts and non-experts need to respect each other as equals because the expert in some area is a non-expert in something else. Most of us have both roles. We know the responsibilities of experts because we know what we expect from them in areas where we are non-experts. Given the social function of experts, their main responsibility is to do their best to testify to the truth in the domain of their expertise, *and to show by their behaviour that they are doing so.* This last part is very important because just trying to convey knowledge is

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not good enough. As a lay person who is listening to the expert or reading what they write, I need to see that they are meeting this responsibility. Otherwise, I will ignore them and then I will lose the advantages of their expertise.

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The responsibility to be accurate and to display accuracy leads to a number of particular behaviours. We can identify these behaviours by observing how the function of experts fails when these responsibilities are not respected.

1. An important responsibility is to admit inaccuracy when it occurs. Often experts do not want to admit their mistakes, probably because they fear that they will lose prestige. But I know that they must sometimes make mistakes because I make mistakes myself, and there is no reason to think that they are more perfect than I am. If they never admit mistakes, I fear that they cannot be trusted in any claim or recommendation. Besides, inaccurate testimony is almost always discovered eventually, and if experts do not admit it as soon as they discover it, the public perception of their trustworthiness sharply sinks, and the public loses the advantage of their knowledge. Numerous examples of not admitting mistakes occurred during the COVID pandemic. For example, at the beginning, when the means of transmission was not known, health experts in the US urged surface sterilization of everything from doorknobs to grocery bags. When it was discovered that the virus was transmitted primarily through the air, they stopped urging surface sterilization but did not explain that there was a change. Many people continued to go to unnecessary trouble and felt confused. Others stopped trusting the health experts because their honesty was in doubt.
2. Experts would not be caught in mistakes so often if they accurately expressed their degree of confidence in their statements and recommendations in the first place. Experts tend to exaggerate because it gets more attention. But if they said that they are 'reasonably confident' in a statement or that something is 'likely' to be true, then if it turns out to be false, they have not been caught in a falsehood. The general public is more sophisticated than in past generations, and people can handle statements of probability or degrees of confidence. In fact, they prefer it.
3. In order to maintain trust among lay people, experts need to show their awareness of contrary views by other experts and respond to them calmly and fairly. When there is consensus, it is important to convey that fact because it gives extra authority to the experts' claims, but the minority opinion should be treated with respect. Unfortunately, that is happening less and less.
4. It is hard to imagine a worse attack on trust than lying to the non-expert. That rules out the so-called 'noble lie', an inaccurate statement made to prevent people from acting against the public good. It is well known that less than entirely accurate claims were made during the COVID pandemic. At the beginning, people were told not to wear masks because they did not work. The motivation was to keep scarce masks for health professionals whose need was greater. Of course, people were smart enough to ask why medical personnel were wearing masks if they did not work, and the strategy backfired. Later, statistics about herd immunity were 'nudged'. In an interview with Donald

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McNeil, who at the time was a reporter for the *New York Times*, Dr Fauci remarked: 'When polls said only about half of all Americans would take a vaccine, I was saying herd immunity would take 70 to 75 percent. Then, when newer surveys said 60 percent or more would take it, I thought, "I can nudge this up a bit," so I went to 80, 85' (as related by K. Powell and V. Prasad, 'The Noble Lies of COVID-19', *Slate*, 28 July 2021). People rightly thought this 'nudging' was arrogant and disrespectful to the public.

5. Often when experts give advice, they presuppose values that non-experts may or may not share. Experts are expert in a certain field – economics, public health, climate science, academic fields. They are not experts on values. Of course, experts have the right to their value judgements just like everybody else, but it needs to be clear that their expertise does not extend to the way they assess values, and they do not have the right to make value judgements for others. Economists have made value judgements for a long time, and during COVID, public health professionals made many assumptions about values in their recommendations for school closures and business shutdowns that some members of the public did not share. Political authorities have the responsibility to make policy decisions, but they often turned over that responsibility to health experts as cover for their decisions.
6. When an expert's opinion or recommendation becomes politicized, a large proportion of the public loses the advantages of their expertise. The politicization of expert opinion is mostly due to the way their opinions are transmitted to the public. People in the media are usually the link between the expert's judgement and the public, and the media has become more and more polarized politically. It is not the fault of the experts if their findings are distorted and used as a weapon against other viewpoints, but there are ways in which they can couch their statements as facts to be discussed in calm and impartial debate about policy decisions. Unfortunately, the media prefer short statements that can be summarized in attention-grabbing headlines. Subtlety and nuance are lost. Extreme statements are preferred. Those who reject the conclusion as stated then publish with headlines that are extreme in the other direction. So, if an expert in public health or economics or climate science makes a recommendation, what often happens is that one group accepts it uncritically, and another group rejects it uncritically. This produces a very unhealthy relationship between experts and non-experts.

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SL: Do non-experts have responsibilities also?

LZ: We are all thinkers, whether we are acting as an expert or as a non-expert. We do not need to succumb to the manipulation of our opinion by social media and inflammatory media rhetoric. It is important that all of us exercise critical thinking skills in reacting to expert opinion. I think that we have a responsibility to resist falling into epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. As defined by Thi Nguyen, an epistemic bubble is a social structure in which relevant voices are left out, perhaps inadvertently, because most of us tend to obtain

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information from like-minded others. We read and listen to media that agree with us, probably because it is more comfortable. An echo chamber is a social structure that intentionally excludes and discredits other relevant voices, often because the chamber is perceived as a place of safety. Nguyen says that echo chambers are more nefarious and harder to escape than epistemic bubbles. But we are not helpless victims of our echo chambers. We choose to stay within a bubble or echo chamber, and the result is the polarization of viewpoints which have sometimes become so extreme that people will not accept someone as an expert until they first find out the expert's political orientation. *Your* expert is not *my* expert. The logical and expected consequence is that we now see that some people deny that experts exist at all.

SL: How can we regain a healthy relationship between experts and non-experts?

LZ: The problem of belief polarization has been widely discussed. Suspicion of experts outside one's own political sphere is an aspect of that problem. I think that a move in the right direction is to recognize our responsibilities both when we are experts and when we are non-experts, but I think that the deeper problem is that our emotions tend to swamp our ability to think critically and responsibly. This even applies to people who are supposed to know better – people who teach critical thinking. We need to have respect for reason as the arbiter of truth, and in a democracy, we need to have a body of facts accepted by all sides to use as the material for policy deliberations. We cannot get those facts unless the news media accept the value of objectivity. Unfortunately, that value has been explicitly rejected by major news commentators. In 2022, the new dean of the Columbia Journalism School, Jelani Cobb, convened a panel called 'The Objectivity Wars' as his first public event. Several speakers decried objectivity as serving the status quo and a tool of the Right. To quote *New Yorker* writer Masha Gessen, 'My argument is simply that if we're going to have an ideal, then moral clarity would be a much better guiding ideal for journalism than objectivity.' But what happens when Gessen's moral clarity is what many other people call moral error? And what happens when a news reporter's 'moral clarity' leads them to disparage the testimony of an expert whose judgement they want to reject?

It should not be difficult to regain the value of journalistic objectivity since it was an ideal for a long time, and even though it is difficult for all of us to overcome emotional responses to political opponents, we have had calmer and more courteous debates in the past, so it must not be impossible to regain. We also have normal human sympathy on our side. It is not natural to categorize everybody as 'us' vs 'them', including 'our' experts and 'their' experts. We are all mostly alike and can recognize ourselves in each other. We need voices that speak for all of us and to all of us dispassionately, conveying knowledge that all of us can use. I think that experts have the responsibility to be among those voices.

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