

Covert Normative Judgments in Expert Testimony

Alex Worsnip

To appear in Anthony Nadler, Molly O'Rourke-Friel & Doron Taussig,
Truth After Post-Truth: Finding a Way Forward

Draft of September 2024 – please cite published version if possible

1. Prelude: epistemic crisis and distrust of experts

A recently popular narrative among the intellectual classes is that America (perhaps along with some other Western nations) is in an “epistemic crisis”.¹ Roughly, the idea is that we live in a time where there is deep and fundamental disagreement not just about values, but about basic empirical facts: the reality of climate change; the legitimacy of election results; the safety and efficacy of vaccines; the existence of racism in American society; and so on. Many citizens cluster into one of two large “tribes” whose conceptions of social and political life are radically divergent; in picturesque terms, “alternate realities”. Not only do the tribes disagree about the facts, but they trust virtually none of the same sources of information and evidence: one side trusts the “mainstream” (i.e. liberal or centrist) media, academic institutions, and scientists; while the other trusts Fox News, other (more radical) news outlets, religious authorities, law enforcement, and—of course—Donald Trump. This makes their disagreements virtually impossible to practically resolve: almost any evidence that one could appeal to in trying to convince someone on the other side will simply be rejected by that side as coming from an unreliable or biased source (Lynch 2020).

As this characterization of our epistemic crisis makes clear, part of the (alleged) problem is a large sector of the citizenry distrusts the experts—or, at least, the establishment experts, whom those alleging the problem tend to assume are the ones with genuine, and not just claimed, expertise. Famously, the UK politician Michael Gove—a leaving campaigner for Brexit, which the vast majority of economic experts (largely correctly²) predicted would be economically disastrous—dismissed this expert consensus with the proclamation that “people in this country have had enough of experts [...] from organizations with acronyms saying that they know what is best.”³ And the last decade has seen the advent of books with titles like *The Death of Expertise* (Nichols 2017), written by those who—unlike Gove—see this trend as something to be deeply regretted. Empirical work does suggest fairly

Work on this paper was supported in part by a subgrant from Arizona State University’s *Humility in Inquiry* project, funded by the Templeton Foundation; I gratefully acknowledge the support. While this particular paper is solo-authored and the views expressed should not be attributed to them, I would like to thank my fellow team members on the grant project—Kurt Gray, Jeff Greene, Devin Lane, Giulia Napolitano, and Sam Pratt—for many excellent conversations about deference to experts, which have influenced my thinking enormously. For helpful feedback and questions about this paper (or related, now-abandoned predecessors to it), I would like to thank audiences at King’s College London, Tulane University, a workshop on “epistemic norms for the new public sphere” at the University of Warwick, and the Hettleman talks at UNC Chapel Hill, and Daniel Muñoz. Special thanks to Jonathan Leader Maynard and Jessica Marsden for many stimulating conversations about this topic.

¹ See e.g. Rediehs (2016), Roberts (2017, 2020), Goldberg (2020), and Brooks (2020).

² See e.g. Kaya et al. (2023).

³ As interviewed by Faisal Islam on Sky News on June 3rd, 2016. See https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Michael_Gove

widespread (and increasing) distrust of establishment experts.⁴ While this distrust is most pronounced among those on the right, there are some issues (and corresponding domains of expertise) on which those on the left distrust the experts—notably, on economics. For example, those on the left often reject the expert consensus⁵ that developed countries dismantling protectionist measures is economically beneficial for both developed and developing countries.⁶

2. The philosophers' solution: deference to experts

Many contemporary epistemologists (i.e., philosophers who specialize in the study of knowledge and rational belief) agree that this distrust of experts, and refusal to accept their claims, is not only socially harmful but also irrational. An increasing number of epistemologists advocate a radical form of *deference* to experts, whereby on complex scientific and policy issues, one does not even try to evaluate the primary data and evidence for oneself, but rather quasi-automatically accepts the expert consensus (Huemer 2005; Zagzebski 2012; Ahlstrom-Vij 2015; Grundmann 2021; Matheson 2024). The key argument for this prescription starts with the claim that given the complex and technical nature of the evidence pertaining to these issues, ordinary citizens typically lack the competence to understand this evidence and reach a well-founded evaluation of the conclusions it supports. For example, understanding climate data and drawing conclusions from it requires a level of technical proficiency that laypeople simply lack. When we lack this competence, these epistemologists claim, it is irresponsible to even try to gather and evaluate the evidence for ourselves—or, in a contemporary phrase, to “do our own research” (Levy 2022; Ballantyne et al. 2024). Instead, we should simply defer to those who do have the relevant competence. By doing so, we stand a better chance of arriving at a true belief.

This development in epistemology is a significant piece of intellectual history because it represents a turn away from a venerable tradition that stresses the primacy of intellectual autonomy—of interrogating, rather than uncritically accepting, the claims of those in authority.⁷ This normative orientation continues to be tacitly assumed in the rhetoric and practice of much contemporary Western liberal education, which often presents itself as equipping students to “think for themselves,” “challenge orthodoxy,” or “reach their own conclusions.”⁸ And indeed, some philosophers continue to push back against the enjoinder to uncritically defer to experts, and to stress the value of at least a modest degree of epistemic self-reliance (Hazlett 2016; Lackey 2018, 2021). Others have identified ways in which deference to experts is not a panacea for our epistemic troubles—for example, by pointing out that figuring out *which* experts to defer to (or perhaps, who even counts as an expert in

⁴ See e.g. Kennedy, Tyson & Funk (2002); Kennedy & Tyson (2023).

⁵ See Whaples (2006). Some recent work in economics (e.g. Autor et al 2016) has put some pressure on the contention about the effect on developed countries, but the positive effect on developing countries is still very widely accepted.

⁶ See e.g. Rankin (2001: 359); Guisinger (2017: 176-7). This consensus is also rejected by many on the contemporary populist right, and seems to be accepted most by centrists and moderates.

⁷ A classic historical source is Kant (1784/1996). For an interesting discussion of some similar ideas in classical Chinese philosophy see Tiwald (2023).

⁸ For example, here is the oft-quoted American Association of University Professors (AAUP) [1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure](#): “the university teacher [...] should, above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves.”

the first place) can sometimes be almost as hard as trying to reason for oneself about an issue (Millgram 2015: ch. 1, appendix A; Nguyen 2020; Ballantyne 2022).

My aim in the remainder of this essay is to highlight a reason for caution about deference to experts that is distinct from all those just mentioned, which I will call *the problem of covert normative judgments in expert testimony*. My aim is not to argue that we should never defer to experts, but to raise to prominence a danger of deference (and a complication for its rationality) that I believe has received insufficient attention.⁹ Awareness of this problem is important not just for laypeople considering whether to defer, but also for experts themselves. Accordingly, I will ultimately conclude with some reflections on how experts can be appropriately cognizant of the problem in issuing testimony and advice, and in so doing, make this testimony more worthy of deference.

3. Descriptive vs. normative judgments

Philosophers and social scientists frequently distinguish descriptive judgments and normative judgments. Very roughly, descriptive judgments are judgments about how the existing world *is*. Most descriptive judgments are empirical: they are to be settled through empirical observation and scientific methods. By contrast, normative judgments are judgments about how the world *ought* to be, what people ought to do (or believe, intend, hope for, etc.), or whether (aspects of) some existing or possible state of affairs is good or bad, valuable or disvaluable.¹⁰ Normative judgments include, though are not exhausted by, moral judgments. People's normative judgments are often also called their "values" or "value judgments."¹¹

To take an example that might arise in the context of expert testimony, the judgment that broccoli boosts immune health is a descriptive judgment, whereas the judgment that you *should* eat more broccoli is a normative judgment. Of course, like many other normative judgments, the normative judgment that you should eat more broccoli might be partly *based* on the descriptive judgment that broccoli boosts immune health. But if it is, it is also—perhaps tacitly—based on further normative judgment(s), which might include something like: "even if you dislike broccoli, boosting immune health is more important than avoiding the unpleasant taste". While this judgment may be very plausible, the crucial point for our purposes is that it must be added to the descriptive judgment that broccoli boosts immune health in order for the specific normative judgment that you should eat more broccoli to logically follow. When someone makes a specific normative judgment A on the basis of a descriptive judgment B, but some other normative judgment C is required to derive the specific normative judgment, we can say that they (again, perhaps tacitly) presuppose or assume C.

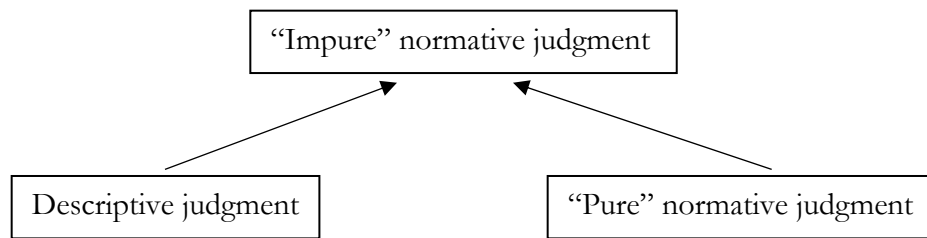
Philosophers sometimes call our most fundamental normative judgments—ones that, plausibly, are not themselves based on *any* descriptive judgments—the "pure" normative judgments,

⁹ This is not to say that my argument is entirely without precedent. I will be building on insights of others, including Douglas 2008; Elliott & Resnik 2014; Bennett 2020: esp. 251-2; Harvard et al. 2021; Duijf 2021: esp. 9290; and Barnes forthcoming. But my precise framing of the problem as an issue for deference is, to my knowledge, largely original.

¹⁰ Some philosophers use 'normative judgment' more narrowly to refer to judgments about what people ought to do and distinguish it from evaluative judgments, which concern good and bad. Here I will use the term in the broader way that encompasses both of these things.

¹¹ I prefer the term 'normative judgment' because 'value judgment' might suggest that all of the judgments involved are *evaluative* judgments of good and bad (cf. the previous footnote). But not all judgments about what we ought to do are obviously founded in judgments of good and bad; this is a controversial metanormative assumption.

in contrast to more specific or “impure” normative judgments (McGrath 2009). Pictorially, this model can be represented thus:



4. Deference about normative judgments?

Strikingly, while (as we’ve already seen) many philosophers think you’re required to defer to experts about *descriptive* matters, many philosophers think that in sharp contrast, there’s something deeply problematic or strange about deferring on normative, especially pure normative matters. The point is most often made with respect to moral judgment (Driver 2006; Hills 2009; McGrath 2009). Suppose, for example, that you are wondering whether meat-eating is morally permissible. And suppose you ask someone whether it is morally permissible and they say it isn’t. It would be odd, these philosophers think, if you now just believed that meat-eating is not morally permissible purely on their say-so, without asking them for the reasons and trying to understand them. Note that this contrasts with many descriptive cases: it’s *not* odd, the thought is, to simply accept the testimony of a climate scientist when they say that global temperatures are rising due to human activity without asking for or trying to comprehend the evidence on which they base this judgment.

A bit of qualification is required about the moral case. You might defer to someone on whether meat-eating is morally permissible without any oddness under certain conditions. Whether meat-eating is morally permissible is, arguably, an impure moral question: it depends on certain descriptive facts—perhaps, on whether (certain) animals feel pain, or the conditions under which they are bred, or whether individual meat-eating causally contributes to the production of meat for consumption. Suppose that the reason why you are currently uncertain about whether meat-eating is morally permissible is *just* that you are uncertain about these descriptive facts. You might then defer to someone who is an expert about these descriptive matters about whether meat-eating is morally permissible, *if* you assume that this person shares your values, your pure moral judgments. Here, you are effectively deferring to them about whether the descriptive facts are such that (by your shared values) meat-eating is morally permissible. This is not odd. What is supposed to be odd, though, is deferring to pure moral judgments, or to impure moral judgments when the pure moral judgments they depend on are in question or not known to be shared.

Different philosophers have given different explanations of why this is odd, and in particular of why it is odder than deference about descriptive matters. An immediate candidate explanation might be that we can’t gain moral knowledge by testimony. But participants in the literature almost universally reject this explanation. Instead, they appeal to other explanations: for example, that moral deference is problematic is because we can’t gain moral *understanding* by testimony (Hills 2009), or because there is something distinctively *morally* problematic about deferring on moral matters

(Hopkins 2007; Crisp 2014). Others think that the difference is simply due to the fact that while there are experts about (many) descriptive facts, there is no such thing as a moral expert: (pure) moral thinking is equally accessible to everyone, and requires no special expertise or access to any particular evidence (Williams 2005: 205; Davia & Palmira 2015). Still others think that it is because there are no objective moral facts to defer about; morality is relative to individual judgment or moral judgments are expressions of personal preferences (McGrath 2011, though she does not definitively endorse this explanation). And still others that think that in the final analysis deference about moral matters is not odd after all; or, at least, that even if it seems a little strange, there is nothing truly wrong or irrational about it (Sliwa 2012; Enoch 2014; Wiland 2017).

For our purposes, we do not need to settle this debate, for the crucial point is this: even if there are experts about moral (and more broadly, normative) matters, and even if it's rational to defer to *them*, there is little reason to think that those with expertise about descriptive (e.g., scientific) matters have special moral expertise about related normative issues. Return to the broccoli example. A doctor or nutritional scientist might be an expert on whether broccoli boosts immune health. But do they really have any special expertise on the normative question of whether boosting your health is more important than avoiding foods you dislike? I think they do not: this is a normative judgment that doctors have no special authority with respect to.

The broccoli example may seem silly or trivial, but we don't have to change it too much to get something that is more interesting. For example, a doctor might be an expert on the negative effects of consuming fatty foods or alcohol and how they can shorten your length of life. But there's actually, a genuine, non-obvious normative question about whether a long life is necessarily better than a shorter life where you get to eat and drink what you like. And doctors have no special expertise with respect to that.

Let's consider some higher-stakes examples. Economists may be experts with respect to the descriptive question of which policies will boost overall GDP, but they have no special expertise with respect to the normative question of how important boosting overall GDP is relative to ensuring equality (cf. Barnes forthcoming). Epidemiologists might be experts about what measures most effectively combat the spread of infectious diseases, but they have no special expertise with respect to the normative question of the relative importance of avoiding the spread of these diseases as compared with other socially desirable outcomes such as presenting social isolation and mental health crises, the educational benefits of in-person instruction, and so on. Climate scientists are experts with respect to whether and why climate change is happening, but they have no special expertise about our moral responsibilities to future generations and how to weigh these against short-term economic pains (cf. Broome 2012).

It's not, of course, that scientists and other experts should be forbidden from making judgments about these normative matters. Scientists are human beings too, and it is part of the life of a human being to make normative judgments. What is problematic is their (perhaps tacitly) claiming expertise about such matters, or claiming that they should be *deferred* to about them. This is an instance of what Nathan Ballantyne (2019) calls "epistemic trespassing," where someone claims expertise about a field outside their genuine field of expertise. Moreover, even when scientific experts do not claim expertise about normative matters, ordinary people may treat them as having expertise about those

matters, perhaps in part because they don't clearly distinguish between descriptive matters and related normative matters. This too is problematic, if scientific experts have no genuine expertise about these normative matters.

5. The problem of covert normative judgments in expert testimony

So far, we might think insofar as there is a problem here, the solution is obvious. We should just defer to the technical or scientific experts about descriptive judgments (or, more precisely, the domain of descriptive judgments that they are experts about), but not about normative judgments.

The problem, though, is that almost by their very nature, scientific or policy *advice* and *recommendations* necessarily incorporate, or are based on, both descriptive and normative judgments. For pieces of advice or recommendations are claims about what we *ought* to do—specifically, they tend to be what we earlier called “impure” normative judgments, that themselves depend upon both descriptive and (perhaps tacitly) pure normative judgments. Returning to an example just mentioned, suppose an epidemiologist says, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, that we should keep schools closed rather than reopening them. This is an impure normative judgment, partly based on descriptive judgments about the effects of reopening schools on the spread of COVID-19, but also partly based on further normative judgments about the relative importance of preventing this spread as compared with the benefits of in-person instruction (on educational outcomes, on mental health, and so on). Thus, if we want experts to be in the business of giving *advice* at all—rather than just giving entirely neutral statements of the facts without making any consequent recommendations—it is hard to see how to defer to this advice without, in effect, deferring to them on both descriptive and normative matters. We seem to face the choice of either deferring on both or deferring on neither—neither of which is ideal.

The problem is further intensified by the fact that often, it is not obvious that (or which) normative judgments are lurking in the background of experts' testimony. When there is a normative judgment in the background of expert advice, but it is not obvious that this is so, I will say that it is a *covert* normative judgment. Let's explore a few ways in which this can be so, roughly from the most obvious to the most subtle.

First, and most simply, laypeople might simply not appreciate the point I just made, that there are always normative judgments in the background of advice. Some of the public discourse around “following the science” makes it sound as if descriptive science on its own—without any further normative judgments—can just dictate what ought to be done, which suggests a lack of appreciation of the exact point just mentioned. Those who don't appreciate this point may *unwittingly* defer to experts' normative judgments, simply just not realizing that these judgments are there in the background of their advice.

Second, even when we do appreciate that there are normative judgments in the background of expert testimony, it is sometimes impossible to know *which* normative judgments are in the background. Return to the example of the epidemiologist who says we should keep schools closed. This advice seems to reflect some sort of judgment that the effects of re-opening schools on the spread of COVID-19 will be severe enough to outweigh the benefits of in-person instruction (both for students' educations and for their mental health). But the advice itself doesn't make clear what

kind of normative judgment about the relative priority of these goals is being made. It could be that the epidemiologist accepts that it can be legitimate to accept a moderate degree of spread of COVID-19 in order to secure the benefits of in-person instruction, but thinks that in these conditions the effect of re-opening on the spread of COVID-19 will be truly catastrophic. Or it could be that the epidemiologist thinks that prevention of the spread of COVID-19 should be given absolute (or almost absolute) priority over the benefits of in-person instruction, and so that even a modest increase in the spread of COVID-19 (as a result of re-opening) cannot be tolerated. We cannot tell, just from the advice, what normative judgment is being made; and thus we cannot be sure whether we share the normative judgment and hence can rationally defer to the overall advice.

Third, there are judgments involving concepts that look descriptive but are in fact (partly) normative, and thus that don't wear their normativity "on their sleeves."¹² Consider for example the WHO's recent proclamation that "there is no safe level of alcohol consumption."¹³ It might seem that judgments about what is safe, medically speaking, are straightforward descriptive judgments. But as several commentators noted in the wake of the pronouncement, if 'safe' means 'completely risk-free', then it would also be true that there is "no safe level" of crossing the road or driving. Yet the WHO doesn't say that. This suggests that they are tacitly making a normative judgment that those things are *worth* the risk whereas the enjoyment of alcoholic beverages (even in moderation) isn't. In that case, in their usage, 'safe' doesn't mean 'completely risk-free' but rather something more like 'low-risk enough that the benefits are worth it'. But then the concept of something's being 'safe' is actually covertly normative, and their judgment that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption is a covert normative judgment. Again, WHO officials have no special authority with respect to the normative judgment that the risks of moderate alcohol consumption aren't worth the enjoyment of it, yet they presented themselves as experts on this matter giving official advice.

Fourth and finally, even when we confine ourselves to judgments that really *are* fully descriptive, many philosophers of science have suggested that the scientific *process* that produces these judgments is nevertheless unavoidably infused with normative judgments (Longino 1990; Douglas 2000, 2008, 2009). Harvard et al. (2021) illustrate this point in detail with respect to a recent study of the risks and benefits of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine (which, readers may recall, was at least somewhat less effective than the competing Pfizer and Moderna vaccines [Cohen 2021] and has recently been withdrawn). As they point out, normative judgments unavoidably entered into this study at several points. First, they entered at the point of deciding that the study was worth undertaking in the first place (as opposed to deciding whether to continue offering the AstraZeneca vaccine on the basis of the existing evidence and using scarce scientific resources to investigate other questions). Second, they entered at the point of deciding which variables and outcomes were worth including in the model: for example, in including age, sex and "frontline status" as input variables but not including race, income, occupation or household size. This assumes, roughly, that the effect of the former variables on vaccine efficacy is more important to know about than the effect of the latter (or, perhaps, that the latter were unlikely *enough* not to make a difference, or difficult enough to investigate, as to be

¹² In a previous paper (Worsnip 2017), I called these judgments—ones that are presented as descriptive but are in fact normative—"cryptonormative judgments."

¹³ <https://twitter.com/WHOWPRO/status/1655041779719364609>

justifiably disregarded). Similarly, some adverse side-effects that could potentially result from the vaccine were not included as outcomes in the model, which again reflects a normative judgment that all-things-considered these outcomes were not crucial to investigate. Third, normative judgments entered at the point of deciding what level of evidence or certainty was needed to draw a conclusion from the data. As many philosophers of science have emphasized (e.g. Douglas 2000, 2008), deciding how much evidence to require before drawing a conclusion requires considering the *risks* of drawing a false conclusion as well as those of failing to draw a true conclusion. Again, the evaluation of how significant these risks are and hence of how much evidence we *ought* to require before reaching a conclusion involves normative judgment.

The point here is not that the normative judgments these scientists made were mistaken—they may well have been well-justified and sensible. The point is rather that even to reach a descriptive judgment about the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine, scientists had to make these normative judgments. That complicates the picture for deference because when we defer to scientists even on these purely descriptive judgments, we defer to them on judgments that were themselves shaped by normative judgments—which we may or may not share—and that might have been different had different normative judgments been employed. It also casts doubt on any solution to the problem of covert normative judgments that simply instructs scientists to stay out of making normative judgments (and any kind of advice or recommendation) and “stick to the facts.” Given the unavoidability of normative judgment in the scientific process, even that which is aimed at establishing purely descriptive facts, this may just not be possible.

Let’s take a step back. In this section, I’ve surveyed four ways in which expert testimony can covertly encode normative judgments. But why exactly is this a problem? The primary reason is that, as I’ve been continually stressing, scientists and other experts generally have no special expertise or authority with respect to normative judgments, and so there is no special reason to *defer* to them about these judgments. Thus, when their judgments, advice and recommendations encode both descriptive judgments (that they do have expertise with respect to) and normative judgments (that they do not), it is hard to reach an overall verdict about whether to defer to them. And, when the normative judgments are covert, we may *think* we are deferring to them only about the descriptive issues when we are in fact deferring to them about the normative ones as well.

This might not be such a big problem if we could generally expert scientists to make normative judgments that the majority of laypeople do (or would) share. But there may be reasons to expect scientists’ normative judgments to diverge from those of many laypeople. A key point here is that scientists and other experts are not demographically representative of the general population. In particular, they tend to be socioeconomically privileged (Morgan et al. 2022). As such, they may place insufficient weight on risks that matter more to the socioeconomically underprivileged. If this is so, then it can be quite reasonable for many laypeople to be cautious about deferring to experts who do not share their values, when these values are encoded into these experts’ testimony.

Indeed, we might worry that a society in which people deferred to experts on normative judgments, or on judgments that tacitly encode normative judgments, would fall short of important democratic ideals (Hazlett 2016; van Wietmarschen 2019). Even if we think that there is no democratic requirement for a society to be responsive to all of citizens’ ill-informed or irrational descriptive

judgments, it is much less controversial that a thriving democracy should reflect its citizens' *values*, and not just those of an expert elite.¹⁴ If people were to uncritically defer to experts about matters that encode normative judgments, and to shape their political behavior accordingly, they might unwittingly contribute to fostering a political system that fails to represent their own values. This provides further reason for caution about encouraging people to defer to experts uncritically, at least about matters that involve normative judgment in whole or in part.

6. What to do

What can we do about the problem of covert normative judgments in expert testimony? A preliminary and basic point is that our current public discourse about deference to experts is too coarse. Those who encourage us to place more trust in experts tend to, in effect if not design, encourage us to defer to them about not just descriptive but normative judgments. This occurs whenever we are encouraged to uncritically defer to expert *advice*, which, as I've shown, by its nature presupposes normative judgments. On the other hand, those who encourage us to place *less* trust in experts tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater, encouraging us to defer to them about neither normative nor descriptive judgments. Public discourse around deference to experts needs to more clearly distinguish descriptive and normative judgments—if not under that terminology, then under other terminology—which in turn requires us to educate people about the distinction between the two.¹⁵ And it ought to recognize that scientific experts' expertise generally pertains to descriptive rather than normative judgments, encouraging more deference about the former than the latter.

But this is not enough to address the problem, given the ways that expert testimony often—sometimes unavoidably—incorporates both descriptive and normative judgments. In these cases, the problem can best be addressed by experts themselves, in the ways that they give testimony and advice. It would be too drastic to say that experts should refrain from making normative judgments, or from giving advice that encodes such normative judgments. As I've said, experts are human beings too, and like other human beings, it is natural for them to have (and share) opinions about what *ought* to be done. Moreover, in some cases, these opinions may be based on normative judgments that are largely uncontroversial, or at least widely shared. Indeed, as we've seen, the value-laden nature of the scientific enterprise makes it effectively *impossible* for scientists to refrain from making normative judgments that shape their ultimate judgments even about purely descriptive matters.

Instead, I join others (e.g. Douglas 2008; Elliott & Resnik 2014; Harvard et al. 2021) in calling on scientists and other experts to make the normative judgments that their advice is based on more explicit—that is, *overt*. Sometimes, this may require some reflection, unearthing normative judgments that they do not realize that they are making or assuming. If experts do this, laypeople will be in a better position to determine whether they agree with the normative judgments being made, and hence whether to defer to the experts' overall advice. And we will all be in a better position to highlight the

¹⁴ Cf. Christiano's (2008) case for "values-only voting."

¹⁵ K-12 education currently teaches a distinction between "fact" and "opinion," a distinction philosophers tend to dislike, both because it belies that one can have an opinion about a factual matter, and because it tacitly and contentiously assumes that there are no facts about normative (especially moral) matters (McBrayer 2015). I suggest that the related, but different, distinction between descriptive and normative judgments—without the assumption that all opinions are equally valid when it comes to normative judgments—would be a better distinction to teach.

ways in which experts' normative judgments are contestable, and when appropriate, to democratically contest them.¹⁶

My argument for this conclusion has been based on the contention that if scientists make their normative judgments explicit, people will be in a better position to make informed deference decisions. However, though this is speculative, it is possible that it will also have the benefit of enhancing public trust in experts about the (descriptive) issues that they really *are* experts about. When experts fold value judgments into their testimony, this may feed into the sense that they are lecturing people or bossing them around, which in turn fuels resentment and distrust of experts. This resentment and distrust is plausibly part of what causes people to refuse to defer to experts even about purely descriptive issues. Whether experts' tendency to make covert normative judgments is part of the causal picture in our current moment of distrust of experts, and whether making them overt would help to address this, is worthy of future empirical study.¹⁷

References

- Ahlstrom-Vij, Kristoffer (2015). The Social Virtue of Blind Deference. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91(3), 545-582.
- Autor, David H.; Dorn, David; and Hanson, Gordon H. (2016). [The China Shock: Learning from Labor Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade](#). *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper* 21906.
- Ballantyne, Nathan (2019). Epistemic Trespassing. *Mind* 128(510), 367-395.
- Ballantyne, Nathan (2022). Novices and Expert Disagreement. In Ballantyne & Dunning (eds.), *Reason, Bias, and Inquiry: The Crossroads of Epistemology and Psychology*. Oxford University Press, 227-253.
- Ballantyne, Nathan; Celniker, Jared; and Dunning, David (2024). "Do Your Own Research." *Social Epistemology* 38(3), 302-317.
- Barnes, Gordon (forthcoming). The Abuse of Expertise and the Problem with Public Economics. *Social Theory and Practice*.
- Bennett, Matthew (2020). Should I Do As I'm Told? Trust, Experts, and COVID-19. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 30(3), 243-263.
- Brooks, David (2020). [The Rotting of the Republican Mind](#). *The New York Times*, November 26, 2020.
- Broome, John (2012). *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*. W.W. Norton & co.
- Christiano, Thomas (2008). *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.
- Clark, Cory; Isch, Calvin; Everett, Jim; and Shariff, Azim (ms.) Politicization Undermines Trust in Institutions, Even Among the Ideologically Aligned Public. Preprint at <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-3239561/v1>.

¹⁶ Schroeder (2021) goes a step further and argues that, when their research requires them to make normative judgments, scientists should actually replace their own normative judgments with those of the public. I am more skeptical about this suggestion, but discussion of it will have to wait for another day.

¹⁷ Some empirical work has begun to examine this, including Elliott et. al (2017), Hicks & Lobato (2002), and Douglas, Turri & Buckwalter (ms.). Also relevant is Clark et al.'s (ms.) perhaps surprising finding that individuals trust institutions less when they perceive them as "politicized," *even when there is ideological alignment between the individual and the institution*.

- Cohen, Jon (2021). [AstraZeneca Lowers Efficacy Claim for COVID-19 Vaccine, A Bit, After Board's Rebuke](#). *Science*, March 25, 2021.
- Crisp, Roger (2014). Moral Testimony Pessimism: A Defence. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 88, 129-143.
- Davia, Cory and Palmira, Michele (2015). Moral Deference and Deference to an Epistemic Peer. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 65(261), 605-625.
- Douglas, Heather (2000). Inductive Risk and Values in Science. *Philosophy of Science* 67(4), 559-579.
- Douglas, Heather (2008). The Role of Values in Expert Reasoning. *Public Affairs Quarterly* 22(1), 1-18.
- Douglas, Heather (2009). *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Douglas, Heather; Turri, John; and Buckwalter, Wesley (ms.). Values and the Authority of Science.
- Driver, Julia (2006). Autonomy and the Asymmetry Problem for Moral Expertise. *Philosophical Studies* 128(3), 619-644.
- Duijf, Hein (2021). Should One Trust Experts? *Synthese* 199(3-4), 9289-9312.
- Elliott, Kevin C.; McCright; Aaron M., Allen, Summer; and Dietz, Thomas (2017). Values in Environmental Research: Citizens' Views of Scientists Who Acknowledge Values. *PLoS ONE* 12(10): e0186049.
- Elliott, Kevin C. and Resnik, David B. (2014). Science, Policy, and the Transparency of Values. *Environmental Health Perspectives* 122(7), 647-650.
- Enoch, David (2014). A Defense of Moral Deference. *Journal of Philosophy*, 111(5) 229-258.
- Goldberg, Jeffrey (2020). [Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy](#). *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2020.
- Guisinger, Alexandra (2017). *American Opinion on Trade: Preferences Without Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Grundmann, Thomas (2021). Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition. In Bernecker, Flowerree & Grundmann (eds.), *The Epistemology of Fake News*, Oxford University Press, 134-155.
- Harvard, Stephanie; Winsberg, Eric; Symons, John; and Adibi, Amin (2021). Value Judgments in a COVID-19 Vaccination Model: A Case Study in the Need for Public Involvement in Health-Oriented Modelling. *Social Science & Medicine* 286, 114323.
- Hazlett, Allan (2016). The Social Value of Non-Deferential Belief. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94(1), 131-151.
- Hicks, Daniel J. & Lobato, Emilio Jon Christopher (2022). Values Disclosures and Trust in Science: A Replication Study. *Frontiers in Communication* 7.
- Hills, Allison (2009). Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology. *Ethics* 120(1), 94-127.
- Hopkins, Robert (2007). What is Wrong with Moral Testimony? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74(3), 611-634.
- Huemer, Michael (2005). Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible? *Metaphilosophy* 36(4), 522-531.
- Kant, Immanuel (1784/1996). An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? In *Practical Philosophy* (ed. & trans. Gregor), Cambridge University Press.
- Kaya, Ahmet Ihsan; Liadza, Iana; Low, Hailey; Sanchez Juanino, Patricia; and Millard, Stephen (2023). [Revisiting the Effect of Brexit](#). National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

- Kennedy, Brian; Tyson, Alec; and Funk, Cary (2022). [Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines](#). Pew Research Center.
- Kennedy, Brian and Tyson, Alec (2023). [Americans' Trust in Scientists, Positive Views of Science Continue to Decline](#). Pew Research Center.
- Lackey, Jennifer (2018). Experts and Peer Disagreement. In Benton, Hawthorne & Rabinowitz (eds.), *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, 228-245.
- Lackey, Jennifer (2021). Preemption and the Problem of the Predatory Expert. *Philosophical Topics* 49(2), 133-150.
- Levy, Neil (2022). Do Your Own Research! *Synthese* 200(356).
- Longino, Helen (1990). *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*. Princeton University Press.
- Lynch, Michael P. (2020). Polarisation and the Problem of Spreading Arrogance. In Alessandra Tanesini and Michael P. Lynch (eds.), *Polarisation, Arrogance, and Dogmatism*, Routledge, 141-157.
- Matheson, Jonathan (2024). *Why It's OK Not to Think for Yourself*. Routledge.
- McBrayer, Justin P. (2015). [Why Our Children Don't Think There are Moral Facts](#). *The New York Times*, March 2, 2015.
- McGrath, Sarah (2009). The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference. *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, 321-344.
- McGrath, Sarah (2011). Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism. *Journal of Philosophy* 108(3), 111-137.
- Millgram, Elijah (2015). *The Great Endarkenment: Philosophy in an Age of Hyperspecialization*. Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, Allison C.; LaBerge, Nicholas; Larremore, Daniel B.; Galesic, Mirta; Brand, Jeannie E.; and Clauset, Aaron (2022). Socioeconomic Roots of Academic Faculty. *Nature Human Behavior* 6, 1625-1633.
- Nguyen, C. Thi (2020). Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts. *Synthese* 197(7), 2803-2821.
- Nichols, Tom (2017). *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. Oxford University Press.
- Rankin, David M. (2001). Identities, Interests, and Imports. *Political Behavior* 23(4), 351-376.
- Rediehs, Laura (2016). [Our Epistemological Crisis](#). *Huffpost*, May 13, 2016.
- Roberts, David (2017). [America is Facing an Epistemic Crisis](#). *Vox*, November 2, 2017.
- Roberts, David (2020). [With Impeachment, America's Epistemic Crisis Has Arrived](#). *Vox*, February 6, 2020.
- Schroeder, S. Andrew (2021). Democratic Values: A Better Foundation for Public Trust in Science. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 72(2), 545-562.
- Sliwa, Paulina (2012). In Defense of Moral Testimony. *Philosophical Studies* 158(2), 175-195.
- Tiwald, Justin (2023). "Getting It Oneself" (*Zide* 自得) as an Alternative to Testimonial Knowledge and Deference to Tradition. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 7, 306-335.
- Whaples, Robert (2006). Do Economists Agree on Anything? Yes! *The Economists' Voice* 3(9), 1-6.
- van Wietmarschen, Han (2019). Political Testimony. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 18(1), 2019, 23-45.
- Wiland, Eric (2017). Moral Testimony: Going on the Offensive. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 12, 51-75.

- Williams, Bernard (2005). Who Needs Ethical Knowledge? In *Making Sense of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 203-212.
- Worsnip, Alex (2017). Cryptonormative Judgments. *European Journal of Philosophy* 25(1), 3-24.
- Zagzebski, Linda (2012). *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. Oxford University Press.