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# Expertise Explained

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## Abstract

In this short piece, I invite readers to think about whether expertise is something as real as trees and mountains, or whether it is our own creation as a society. I discuss the challenges that a purely social view of expertise raises: inconsistent relativism, contradictions, frauds, epistemic and social anarchy. As a way out of these difficulties, I suggest that we must opt for an objective take on expertise. Of course, possessing expertise is relative in the sense that it is a consistent relational property between various levels of expertise. However, this relation is ‘objective’. It is an ‘objective relational property’. Taking this realist view on expertise can shed light on some difficulties, such as the expertise status of Newton in comparison to contemporary physicists and the English proficiency of native English speakers compared to monolingual non-English speakers.

## Introduction

Is expertise a social property determined by society’s choices and how we interact with each other? Is it something that we can point out as existing beyond our minds and communities? Today, many people think that we cannot find expertise in nature as we do with trees, bears and mountains. They hold that expertise is something we create together as a society. They call attention to the abundant cases when individuals once hailed as experts have faded into obscurity over time. They also point out people who were dismissed as frauds in their era but whom we now recognize as paradigmatic *connoisseurs*. This perspective gains credence from the fact that expertise is typically identified and accompanied by social validation. The professional qualifications delivered by social institutions seem to set apart genuine experts from the crowd.

This social nature of expertise seems more evident in more mundane cases. Think of a high-school student in twenty-first-century Beijing, China. As a typical Chinese high-school student, he has endured countless hours mastering the intricate strokes of over 3,000 characters essential for reading at least a newspaper! Undoubtedly, he is an expert in Chinese calligraphy in Europe and the Americas. However, as a typical Chinese student in China, he is not an expert in his home country.

Make a bolder leap of imagination and consider what would happen if he travelled to eighth-century China. He would dazzle the inhabitants ruled by the reigning Tang Dynasty with his vast and superior knowledge of mathematics. He would, perhaps, receive the favour of Emperor Xuanzong and serve as director-in-chief in the renovation of the imperial palace. Similarly, if he were to travel to seventeenth-century Europe, he would teach a



few things to luminaries like Descartes (founder of analytic algebra), Fibonacci (who popularized the decimal system in the West) and Al-Khwarizmi, the ‘Father of algebra’. Yet, he is far from being an expert mathematician in his native twenty-first-century Beijing. Strangely enough, he seems to be both an expert and a non-expert in mathematics; furthermore, he seems to be an expert and a non-expert in Chinese calligraphy at the same time! His expertise seems to depend on the presence or absence of certain groups of individuals.

Cases like these suggest that whether one is an expert or not depends on the type of community to which one belongs. However, if true, this would have shattering consequences for the idea that expertise is something as objective and real as trees and bears. If social validation and the community to which one belongs is all there is to expertise, then we would have the power to bring expertise into or out of existence at will. We could, as the case of the Chinese high-school boy suggests, be an expert and a non-expert at the same time. That does not sound right.

Furthermore, each of us would be a highly qualified expert in a given domain somewhere! You just have to select the right place to shine out.

The difficulties do not end there: if other people entirely determine who is an expert, then what is the incentive to pursue rigorous training in fields like surgery, athletics or writing? As in the case of the Chinese student, expertise seems to boil down to mere social recognition and association with the right crowd. Want to be an expert in English? Just go to a country where English is not the primary language. Dream of being an expert surgeon? Just steer clear of fellow surgeons and, like magic, you become an expert. You are very good at playing basketball but you aspire to be recognized as the best basketball player? You can enjoy the goods of being acclaimed by the masses as another Michael Jordan just by participating in local basketball clubs worldwide. I think something is wrong here. That is why, in the next sections, I argue that, though relational or relative (I use both expressions interchangeably), expertise is an *objective relational or relative*

*property* rooted in skill and knowledge that goes beyond the communities we belong to or what other people think of us.

## Some Problems with the Idea that Expertise is Entirely Social

Undoubtedly, expertise is social in at least one sense. Expertise is social in the sense that the ‘signs’ of expertise typically come in the form of professional qualifications (like physician licences and titles) and social recognition. We rarely have the time and will to ‘put to the test’ the surgical expertise of a doctor, especially if we are in an emergency. We trust social cues like the white coat and the stethoscope. Yet this evident social aspect is not essential for being an expert.

Here are four pressing challenges for those who believe that being socially recognized as an expert is all we need to be experts.

Firstly, social criteria are neither necessary nor sufficient for being an expert. A weightlifting aficionado who usually lifts above 200 kg will continue to excel at this, independently of whether he has received any titles or medals. Likewise, an enthusiast of Roman history who has studied every book that has passed by his hands is an expert in Roman history despite his lack of the corresponding social marks of expertise. To take a real example, think of Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift. He suggested at the beginning of the twentieth century that the continents were moving away from one another and that they once formed one big continent called ‘Pangaea’. Indeed, the continental shelves of Africa and South America, for instance, fit together neatly like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. A coincidence? Just twenty years after he died, advances in palaeomagnetism proved him right. However, his contemporaries mocked him. They regarded him as a fraud. They dismissed his insights because, among other things, he was not a geologist, a geophysicist or a palaeontologist like them. He was an expert in climate; he died during one of his expeditions to the North Pole. Despite his lack of social reputation as an expert, we now know that he was an expert in continental drift.

While no one ever entertained the idea that at some time Europe and America were closer in distance, Wegener knew that the continents did not just move but were still moving!

Social recognition is also not sufficient for being an expert. Some individuals were socially considered experts, but we later found that they carried out fraudulent practices. One example is Andrew Wakefield and his fraudulent research suggesting that vaccines cause autism. He published in prestigious journals like *The Lancet* and was temporarily recognized as an expert by his peers. However, his association between vaccines and autism was proved wrong by close analysis of his publications and subsequent research. Experts found no link between vaccines and autism. Nevertheless, the stir and wave of scepticism he sparked continues unabated. Currently, numerous individuals participate in active anti-vaccination movements around the world. The result? There are spurts of measles, mumps and rubella worldwide. Wakefield had all the medical credentials in the world. He had written and published multiple good papers in prestigious journals, but his research on vaccines was fraudulent. He was not an expert on vaccines and autism.

The second problem is that, if expertise were only a matter of social will, we would face rampant relativism leading to contradictions, that is, to *inconsistent relativism*, where people assert both that P and that not P. This inconsistent relativism would, in turn, lead to professional chaos, fraudulent practices and the proliferation of pseudoscience. If expertise truly depends on our beliefs, then it is subject to our will. This means that we can bring into existence expertise whenever and wherever we please. The very idea is hard to swallow. The reality is that we lack the power to become experts at anything we will, much less when we will. It is also not in our hands to confer expertise on others through sheer force of our will. But the implications do not end there. Perhaps the most alarming consequence is that, if we had the power to bring about expertise at will, then people could be experts and non-experts at the same time. One can, for instance, simultaneously be an expert and a novice surgeon because

some think we are experts, and others think we are novices. Similarly, within a community comprising skilled surgeons and laypeople, we find ourselves occupying both roles concurrently – an unsettling paradox indeed.

While initially believable, this inconsistent relativism about expertise does not fit with the facts. The current 100 m Olympic gold medalist, Italian Marcell Jacobs, is an expert sprinter. He is currently the fastest sprinter in the 100 m on Earth and it does not matter what other people or even he himself thinks about it. Beliefs do not alter his speed. He is still an expert runner. Analogously, expertise in fields like continental drift, exemplified by Wegener's groundbreaking theories, is not contingent upon social recognition. His expertise remains the same. Conversely, a fraudulent physician like Andrew Wakefield does not cease to be a fraud only because most people thought (and many currently think) he was an expert on the relationship between vaccines and autism.

Inconsistent relativism about expertise may also lead to social malpractices. People could accumulate power over diverse social institutions responsible for the economy, health and education just because they can bring people to believe that they are experts at what they do. This situation causes people to distrust social institutions when they do not get the promised results. Given that they are not real experts, the educational, economic and health consequences would be upsetting and dangerous. It would severely damage not only public trust in crucial social institutions and expertise but also cause increased disease rates, economic instability, poor academic performance and other problems. In a society where everyone is an expert, no one is an expert.

A third challenge is that belonging to a community is not sufficient for possessing expertise. Wakefield belonged to the medical community, but he was not and is not an expert in the relationship between vaccines and autism. His professional membership was not sufficient to turn Wakefield into an expert. Similarly, Wegener did not belong to the community of experts in geology and geophysics, but he was still an expert in continental drift. His exclusion from

the geologists' circle was insufficient for turning Wegener into a non-expert.

A final problem with the idea of considering expertise as a matter of social convention is that it entails another perhaps more severe internal contradiction. Just think about it. If we accept that expertise is a matter of social convention, then the fact that we are experts depends on what other people think of us or which social group we belong to. But here is the dilemma: are those who hold this view experts on expertise themselves? According to their own logic, they are experts because it is sufficient that they think of themselves as experts to be experts. But what about those who disagree with them? According to the social view, this view coming from the rest of people turns them into non-experts. If we cannot ascertain whether those advocating the social view of expertise are truly experts on expertise, we are under no obligation to believe what they hold in the first place.

The view that expertise is merely a social matter works against those holding this view. The very view that expertise is a social thing depends on whether people believe it. It does not happen with most types of expertise we know. Expert physicians, calligraphers, sprinters, etc. continue to be experts at what they do, independent of what we (or they themselves) think about their expertise. Why would expertise about expertise be different? I see no reason to think it is different.

These are just some of the challenges that a purely social characterization of expertise faces. But these are sufficient to cast serious doubt on it. Thus, expertise must be something above and beyond our social will and situation.

### **Expertise is Relative in the Sense that it is a Relation, but it is an Objective One**

Expertise is an undeniable objective fact. It is an objective social fact if you like, but it is ultimately an objective fact, much like trees and bears. Social reputation merely serves as an indicator, but it is not the defining factor. We must not confuse our beliefs with the facts. One thing is the evidence for thinking that there is a tree in

front of us, quite another thing is whether there is a tree in front of us.

**‘There is one objective and simple but powerful way to understand expertise that is backed by science and our common sense: expertise consists in performing superiorly on representative tasks.’**

There is one objective and simple but powerful way to understand expertise that is backed by science and our common sense: expertise consists in performing superiorly on representative tasks. Consider again the case of the current fastest human on the planet, Marcel Jacobs. He is an expert at sprinting the 100 m because he is an expert in the representative task of running 100 m at high speed. This is a simple case, but its logic also applies to what surgeons, teachers, lawyers and other types of experts do. They all demonstrate superior performance on the representative tasks of their domains. Lawyers are better than the majority of people at navigating legal intricacies. Teachers are better than most people at conveying complex concepts and surgeons belong to a group of people excelling at performing complex surgical operations.

So, what is expertise? Here is a concise definition:

- Expertise: Carrying out the representative or characteristic tasks in a given domain better than other people.

And here are the fundamental ingredients of expertise:

- Representative task: The characteristic tasks carried out in a given domain.
- Superior performance: Carry out representative tasks better than other people.

We can identify these characteristics in any kind of expertise. In the case of Marcel Jacobs, for example, his expertise consists of:

- Sprinting expertise: Sprinting the 100 m faster than other sprinters.

And the fundamental ingredients of his expertise are the following:

- Sprinting representative task: Sprinting the 100 m.
- Sprinting superior performance: Sprinting faster than other sprinters.

But how can this brief characterization of expertise help us face the problems we saw earlier? The answer is that there are different kinds of expertise, and each one is objective. Let us consider three kinds of expertise in sprinting: global, national and local sprinting expertise.

Marcel Jacobs is an expert runner in the global sense because he is the fastest sprinter on Earth. Jacobs ran the 100 m in 9.8 s and won his first Olympic gold in Tokyo 2021. But you are wrong if you think that making this time is the standard in running. Jacobs belongs to the exclusive group of the 180 individuals who have broken the ‘10 s barrier’ by sprinting the 100 m in under 10s. He is a global kind of expert sprinter.

However, sprinting expertise is not confined to the global stage. German Julian Reus is an expert *national* sprinter. He is currently the fastest 100 m sprinter in Germany. Yet he is not an expert within the community of the 10 s barrier brokers. Similarly, any high-school junior sprinter champion, call him ‘John’, is also an expert in the local sense because he excels at the school level. He is a local kind of expert sprinter. Yet, he is neither a global nor a national expert sprinter.

Does it mean that they are experts and non-experts at the same time? No. Jacobs, Reus, and John are sprinting experts, but their expertise is different. In the same way that sprinting expertise differs from calligraphic and surgical expertise, Jacobs's global expertise is different from Reus's national and John's local expertise. Yet, all three kinds of expertise are objective. John is still a high-school kind of expert. He continues being so even if he were to compete against Jacobs or Reus. In the same way, Jacobs remains a global kind of expert sprinter even when competing against high-school experts like John. Even if, say, Jacobs joins John's community, he continues being a global kind of expert sprinter (of course, insofar as he keeps training at the highest level). The community you belong to does not determine your expertise.

Analogously, expertise does not change with what people think about experts. Even if no one knew that Jacobs could break the 10 s barrier, for instance, he would be an expert sprinter. Jacobs, Reus and John continue to be experts even when most people think that they are not experts. They also remain experts if most people think that, say, John is faster than Reus and Reus than Jacobs.

Now, the question arises whether these relations between different kinds of expertise and their respective communities are nothing more than the inconsistent relativism I have dismissed in the previous section. No, they are not the same thing. Inconsistent relativism about expertise is the idea that one can contradictorily hold that someone is an expert and non-expert at the same time. Jacobs, Reus and John are experts, but different kinds of experts. John is neither a global nor a national expert like Jacobs and Reus. Yet, John does not lose his high-school expertise when he competes against Reus or Jacobs. No contradiction arises.

What can we conclude thus far? Well, although we can say that expertise is a relational property between degrees of performance, it is also objective. Expertise is an objective relational property. Yes, expertise is relative insofar as it is a relation, but it is *consistently relative*. Jacobs's global expertise, for example, consists of his superior performance in relation to

(compared or relative to) the rest of the people inhabiting the world. Reus's national expertise consists of his superior performance in relation to the rest of the people inhabiting Germany. Finally, John's high-school expertise amounts to his superior performance in relation to the rest of the sprinters at his high school. All three relations are relational, yes, but they are also as objective as bears and mountains.

This reasoning also applies to the case of the high-school Chinese student with whom we started. He is an expert outside China insofar as he is one of the few who can do basic Chinese calligraphy outside the limits of that country. He is not an expert in China insofar as most Chinese people know basic Chinese calligraphy. That is, he is an expert in one sense and a non-expert in another sense at the same time. There is no contradiction between being an expert-A in calligraphy and an expert-B in calligraphy. Similarly, if he were to travel to the past, he would be an expert in mathematics in one objective sense (expert-Y), but he is not an expert in mathematics in another equally objective sense within contemporary Chinese society (expert-Z). His expertise, and lack of it, at calligraphy and mathematics is as objective as anything. We only need to avoid referring to expertise in the abstract and be more specific about the kind of expertise to which we are referring.

This characterization of expertise explains other problematic cases we could not explain otherwise. For example, Newton was an expert physicist in the seventeenth century. But Newton is not an expert physicist by today's standards. Is he an expert or not? The answer is that Newton is a seventeenth-century expert physicist, even if he is not a twenty-first-century expert one. If he were to visit us in our century, he would still be a seventeenth-century expert physicist. His expertise is objective, independent of the era he lives in. But are not typical twenty-first-century physicists *more expert* than Newton in physics? They certainly are in the sense that they know more about physics. Yet, Newton continues to be a seventeenth-century expert in physics. Doesn't it seem enough? Well, add to the fact that he was a seventeenth-century expert the fact that he was



a highly creative individual, given the resources available to him. This separates him from many physicists past and present who do not demonstrate such high levels of inventiveness. Besides his expertise in physics, Newton was an expert at making discoveries.

In sum, expertise is not a property that changes with our will or social circumstances. It is a social relational property if you like, but it is also an objective socially consistent relative or relational property. Experts possess expertise independent of what people think about their expertise or to which communities they belong.

## Conclusion

We have seen that the nature of expertise is complex. Yet, we do not have the power to mean and so bring into or out of existence expertise at will. If expertise were purely social and inconsistently relative, we would see anarchy, fraud, contradictions and social

malpractices everywhere. Fortunately, as we have appreciated, the nature of expertise is not dependent on the nature of our personal and social will.

Expertise is, of course, a relational property, but it is as objective as any other property in the world like trees and mountains. In the same way that there is surgical and sprinting expertise, there is local, national and seventeenth-century expertise.

The relative or relational objective nature of expertise is not something new. We classify experts by their objective relations all the time. We intuitively know that Marcel Jacobs is an expert sprinter and that Newton was an expert in physics. We somehow know that expertise is objective, even if we sometimes mistake it for being inconsistently relative instead of consistently relational. But we often get confused by its complex nature. A little conceptual clarification is necessary sometimes to dissipate these kinds of misunderstandings.

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