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Objective Expertise and Functionalist Constraints

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Christian Quast has recently embarked on the project of systematizing the debate about the notion of *expertise*, an extremely fascinating and important issue addressed by scholars of many disciplines yet still in need of an interdisciplinary take. He sheds light on a number of relevant features of this notion and defends what he calls a "balanced" account of expertise, namely one that defines this concept in light of an expert's dispositions, manifestations of their dispositions, and social role or function.

In doing so, Quast argues against three versions of reductionism about expertise: Reductionism$_F$, which reduces expertise to the *function* an expert fulfills in a community; Reductionism$_M$, which confuses expertise with the *manifestation* of an expert's competence; and Reductionism$_D$, in which expertise boils down to possessing suitable *dispositions* in a specific domain—that is, practical abilities or epistemic properties such as knowledge, true beliefs, or understanding.

As an attempt at bringing together interdisciplinary discussions of a specific topic, Quast's project is ambitious and provides a genuine contribution to the ongoing discussions around the topic of expertise in philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences. Inevitably, Quast's rich analysis and original proposal raise a number of worries that deserve to be further inspected.

In this critical reply, I offer some considerations that put pressure on Quast's balanced account and hopefully help anyone interested in this debate take a step forward toward explaining what it takes for one to be an expert. The reply is structured as follows. First, I argue that his allegedly balanced view is liable to a potentially compromising tension between its function component and the ingredients of objective expertise (§1).

Then, I show that Quast's threefold characterization of an objective expert is too strong, as it imposes conditions that several individuals whom we would consider experts are unable to fulfill (§2). Finally, I provide reasons in favor of endorsing an objective account of expertise in light of some specific features of our society, and show how this account can take into due consideration the different services experts ordinarily perform (§3).

Against a Balanced Account of Expertise

The first consideration I want to offer in response to Quast is that, to put it simply, he cannot have his cake and eat it too. Quast devotes a good amount of his paper to convincing us that the aforementioned reductionist accounts of expertise are flawed and that a more plausible story of what it takes for one to be an expert has to rely upon "an entangled interrelationship" between an expert's dispositions and the contextual service function they perform in a community (2019, 412). In this section, I purport to show that such an entangled relationship of dispositions and functions on his balanced approach is largely problematic.

Let us recall Quast's comprehensive definition of an expert, which is offered right at the end of his article:

> ($\text{Expert}_{\text{F-C-M}}$) Someone *e* is an objective expert in contrast to some client *c* within a certain domain *d* only if *e* is undefeatedly disposed to fulfill a particular service function in *d* for *c* adequately at the moment of assessment (412).

At first glance, Quast's move is attractive. In the end, we usually think of experts as subjects who are more competent than most people in a domain,[1] but, at the same time, we grant one the status of an expert (i) based on their social role and (ii) against a relevant contrast class of individuals who are unable to provide a similar service. In contrast, both $\text{Reductionism}_{\text{F}}$ and $\text{Reductionism}_{\text{D}}$ are liable to counterexamples.

The former is wrongly committed to granting the status of an expert translator to a subject who manages a translation-services company by delegating any job to unknown freelancers and lacks any translating skills (402). The latter is wrongly committed to grant the status of a wine expert to an individual who can correctly estimate the value of a wine cellar without having the ability or the willingness to provide an explanation of their evaluation (407).

In contrast, neither the manager nor the wine consultant satisfies the requirements of expertise on the balanced account. The former is not an expert, because he lacks the dispositions required to provide translating services—that is, knowledge of at least two languages, translating skills, and the like. The latter is not an expert, because her competence to assess the value of wine cellars gets defeated by her inability or unwillingness to give an account of her services at the moment of assessment (407).[2]

Dispositions and Functions in Tension

However, a closer inspection of Quast's proposed view of expertise reveals a tension between the disposition component and the function component. Consider the disposition component first and, in particular, his analysis of objective expertise.

He conceives of *objective expertise* as encompassing the following three elements: (i) *primary* competence, which relates to an expert's reliability in delivering the services they are supposed to provide; (ii) *secondary* competence, which relates to an expert's ability to explain their services to a client, thereby establishing and fostering mutual trust; and (iii)

[1] It may be helpful to note that this competence may boil down to different properties and dispositions depending on the specifics of the domain under consideration. For instance, the competence of an expert carpenter might involve a good deal of experience, practical skills, and know-how, whereas the competence of an expert in contemporary history might be mostly based on great instruction, analytical skills, and theoretical understanding of the extant literature and recent historical events.

[2] In the analysis of his wine-expert case, Quast points out that we might ascribe a default expertise to the wine consultant yet withdraw our attribution of expertise if she refuses to provide suitable explanations of her evaluation (407–8).

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intellectually virtuous character, which ensures that an expert is willing to manifest both the above competences when appropriate.

For the time being, let's set aside a reasonable concern one might have about Quast's unduly narrow characterization of the role intellectual-character virtues play in his account of objective expertise.[3]

The balanced account is quite demanding, as according to it someone is an objective expert insofar as they are competent in a given domain, able to provide their clients with tailored explanations of their services, and willing to do so in the appropriate circumstances. Going back to the wine-consultant case, it should be evident that the reason why the consultant might fail to be an expert is that she lacks secondary competence, intellectual virtues, or both, as her inability or unwillingness to share any considerations about her estimate of the wine cellar with the client demonstrates.

As anticipated, on the balanced account these considerations about objective expertise need to be balanced, or implemented, with further remarks on the service function of experts. Here Quast takes quite a concessive route and offers the case of a "private expert": in the example, Christian Quast's wife asks him to find someone who can fix or replace a leaky drain pipe; he approaches the issue by relying on his father-in-law, whose craft hobby enables him to solve the problem (410).

Quast is ready to admit that his father-in-law is more of an expert than himself and his wife, yet he goes so far as to concede that the man satisfies the requirements of a function-based account of expertise.

The function component plays a key role in this account, in that the service his father-in-law fulfills determines

> (i) a relevant contrast class of individuals who lack the disposition to perform a specific function—that is, the class composed of Christian and his wife;
> (ii) a proper characterization of the domain of expertise, namely that of replacing leaky drain pipes;
> (iii) the degree of reliability required for Christian's father-in-law to fulfill the function—that is, Christian's own standards for replacement of leaky drain pipes;
> (iv) a range of similar situations in which the man is supposed to be able to deliver his services; and
> (v) minimum conditions for him to fulfill the individual requirements of objective expertise, which in this case require relative competence to repair the leaky drain pipe at the Quasts' place.

[3] As I have argued elsewhere (see Croce 2019, §§4–5), we have reasons to think the character virtues of an expert make them not only willing but also able to fulfill their service function within a community.

Thus, on Quast's balanced account, possession of expertise depends on *contextual* factors, such as the specifics of the contrast class of laypeople and the situation in which expertise is ascribed, as well as on *practical* factors, such as the needs of the relevant clients and the urgency of the required service. These elements determine whether a hobbyist-craftsperson is an expert in repairing leaky drain pipes or a wine consultant is an expert in value assessment of wine cellars.

Problems of Balance in Expertise

Unfortunately, the "balanced" account emerging from these components is less tenable than one might have initially thought. The first problem is that it is hard to make sense of the notion of objective expertise on such a functionalist account. For possession of *objective* expertise in a domain becomes hostage to two inherently relative elements, namely (i) the *service* someone is disposed and willing to fulfill for (ii) a *community*—or contrast class, to stick with Quast's vocabulary.

On standard comparative accounts of expertise, (ii) obviously plays a major role, as possession of expertise merely amounts to being more of an expert in a (broader or narrower) domain than some group of people and therefore expertise reduces to an entirely comparative notion.

In such a perspective, both Christian's father-in-law and a plumbing engineer are experts in repairing leaky drain pipes although the latter's competence is much broader than the former's. For each of them is more of an expert than the respective contrast class, which includes Christian and his wife in the former case versus, say, most people in the engineer's town, district, or state in the latter case. Clearly, though, this diagnosis comes at the cost of giving up on the inquiry into the objective requirements of expertise.

Despite including (ii) in his account of expertise, Quast purports to endorse a view that makes room for objective expertise. Thus, he has to prevent this relative condition from delivering the standard comparative diagnosis in situations such as the leaky-drain-pipes one.

He does so through the service-function element—that is, (i)—by arguing that one is an objective expert insofar as they are undefeatedly disposed to serve a relevant need of the respective community or contrast class. Thus, on the balanced account we can still attribute objective expertise to both Christian's father-in-law and a plumbing engineer as long as they can fix leaky drain pipes in the respective community or contrast class.

I am unpersuaded by this move for two reasons. The first is that introducing a relative element such as (i) does not neutralize the anti-objective effect of (ii); rather, it is likely to intensify such an effect by adding a further relative variable to the account. The second is that the only way for Quast to grant expertise to his father-in-law and a plumbing engineer is to impose odd restrictions on domains of expertise.

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Specifically, he has to concede that his father-in-law is an expert because he serves the community composed of Christian and his wife by doing something like "repairing leaky drain pipes at the Quasts' place" or "repairing leaky drain pipes of some kind." In contrast, the plumbing engineer is an expert because he serves a wider community by, say, "repairing leaky drain pipes of any kind."

This move would thus generate an unnecessary proliferation of domains of expertise depending on the specific needs of any relevant contrast class. For example, my auntie Renata, who helps most inhabitants of a rural village in Liguria react to (i.e., "like") and comment on the content appearing in their Facebook news feed, would possess objective expertise in something like "adding likes and comments on posts on Facebook" relative to the contrast class composed of the citizens of Bevena, although her competence regarding social networks ends pretty much there.

These considerations show that the balanced account narrows the notion of expertise to the point that we lose our grip on what is objective about an expert's competence. To avoid this result and save both the functionalist spirit of his view and its context sensitivity, Quast should abandon the idea of making room for objective expertise and endorse an entirely comparative account. This is why, in a word, Quast cannot have his cake and eat it too.

On the Fundamental Ingredients of Expertise

The balanced account suffers from a second problem pertaining to the aforementioned ingredients of expertise, namely primary competence, secondary competence, and intellectual virtues (see also Hardwig 1994, 92). According to $\text{Expert}_{\text{F-C-M}}$, expertise requires an *undefeated* disposition to fulfill a particular service function adequately at the moment of assessment.

In turn, all three ingredients feature in the undefeated-disposition requirement, in that lacking any of them defeats the attribution of expertise. In this section, I demonstrate that this account is too strong, as it poses unduly restrictive requirements for one to be an expert. In particular, I worry about secondary competence and what Quast calls "intellectually virtuous character" as necessary components of expertise.

Let us consider secondary, or explanatory, competence first: the ability to give an account of one's performances. We have already seen that on the balanced account, failing to display secondary competence defeats expertise because, as the wine-consultant case shows, we expect from experts that they can give us explanations regarding their services.

However, the plausibility of this understanding of expertise entirely rests on the specifics of the example Quast introduces. In the proposed case, a subject challenges the wine consultant's evaluation because of its inconsistency with the subject's expectations and the testimony of the former owner of the cellar. Notice, though, that the disposition to account for one's performances—in particular, to *laypeople*—requires an entirely different

set of abilities than the ones necessary to fulfill one's service function successfully. The former set includes such intellectual virtues as a sensitivity to a layperson's epistemic resources, communicative clarity, intellectual generosity, and possibly other abilities.[4]

A civil engineer could well possess primary competence in demolishing or rebuilding a bridge and the ability to discuss it with other experts yet lack the competence to provide effective explanations of their techniques, strategies, and related risks to a lay audience. Something similar happens in sports. A lot of amazing athletes can do extremely complicated things that are generally out of reach for most human beings, yet they may not be able properly to account for what they do.

They can show you these actions hundreds of times, but if you ask them to tell you how they do that, you might feel extremely disappointed or confused by their explanations. This is why not all the greatest sport heroes are good coaches and not all the best civil engineers can effectively account for what they do to a lay audience. For as I will stress in the final section, primary competence and secondary competence are, in a sense, different kinds of expertise.

A Private or People's Expertise

The required combination of these competences for a proper understanding of expertise on Quast's view is somewhat surprising if we bear in mind that he wants to confer objective expertise to "private experts," who can offer us quite specific services such as fixing some leaky drain pipes. In Quast's private-expert case, it seems odd to require that Christian's father-in-law be able to give an account of how he is going to fix the pipe in order to fulfill the function of a private expert.

For, on the one hand, the relevant contrast class includes two individuals, namely Christian and his wife, who—as we are told—are both inexperienced in these kinds of handicraft matters. On the other, Christian's father-in-law might even lack the necessary abilities properly to explain how he will repair the pipes.

These considerations make it hard to see why giving an appropriate account of the provided service should be necessary for Christian's father-in-law to be an expert on a functionalist view that aims at being in a position to grant private experts objective expertise.

Consider now the other ingredient of expertise on Quast's view, namely one's intellectual character in the sense of their *willingness* to manifest primary and secondary competence when appropriate. The above considerations about the intellectual abilities required for one to deliver proper explanations of one's service should provide sufficient reason to consider possession of an intellectually virtuous character as a relevant component of the competences required for one to be an expert rather than as mere willingness to manifest

[4] These virtues are part of what I have elsewhere called *novice-oriented abilities* (see Croce 2019, 13).

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such competences.[5] Thus, in the remainder of this critical notice I shall simply tackle the willingness component and, in particular, the willingness to manifest *secondary* competence when appropriate.

Suppose a physicist, call him Ivory Tower, is completely reluctant to share anything related to his work with people, especially laypersons. Ivory's social interactions are limited to what's required for him to keep his position at his institution. Ivory works in optics, and, in particular, he is developing reliable ways to see through walls by using special cameras. More specifically, he is working on a project that would allow rescue teams to individuate people when the terrain is dangerous and would allow cars to avoid accidents by identifying obstacles or vehicles from around the corner.

Quast's view commits us to conclude that Ivory lacks expertise in optics or whatever more specific subfield he is working in because he fails to display the required willingness to give an account of his performances when appropriate. This verdict is unsatisfying in general, as it strikes us as evident that Ivory's extremely sophisticated work in optics should suffice to grant him the status of an expert.

Furthermore, the verdict is unsatisfying even from the perspective of a functionalist account of expertise, as Quast's purports to be. For despite lacking willingness to explain his work to others, Ivory is surely serving laypeople's needs. He does so by attempting to solve problems in optics and providing the community with new resources rather than by making himself accountable for his work to a lay audience, but this merely amounts to another relevant way an expert can serve their community, as I will argue in the next section. Thus, since there seem to be no good reasons to deny Ivory the expertise he has acquired through years of intense work, we can conclude that the willingness to manifest secondary competence is not a necessary condition for one to possess expertise.

Two allegedly key ingredients in Quast's account of expertise, namely secondary competence and the willingness to manifest that competence when appropriate, are less fundamental than one might have initially thought. In fact, they should not be considered necessary requirements for one to be an expert in some domain. In the final section, I shall explore some implications of the considerations offered so far, with the aim of contributing to reaching a better understanding of the notion of, and the role of, an expert in the context of the society we currently live in.

Expertise Today: Toward an Objective Approach

Many reputable scholars characterize the age we live in as a post-truth era (Fuller 2018) in which the very idea of expertise is dead (Nichols 2017), as it has been replaced by a free

[5] For the sake of completeness, it should also be noted that other intellectual virtues may be required for one to possess primary competence in a domain, especially in those fields in which competence involves some propositional knowledge and understanding. In particular, I have in mind virtues such as thoroughness, intellectual perseverance, creativity, open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, and autonomy (see Croce 2019, 18).

market in information and self-attributed competences that takes place in the blogosphere (Coady 2012), the internet (Lynch 2016), and more recently social media, where fake news easily proliferates (Vosoughi et al. 2018). As Nichols thoroughly describes (see §7), we're surrounded by a gigantic amount of news and by experts who are more and more specialized in any domain, and yet we know less than before and distrust expertise.

If there is one thing epistemologists can surely do—in fact, must do—to counteract the advance of post-truth thinking in our society, it is attempting to reach a better understanding of the notion of expertise. Such a service would not solve all the problems, yet it would at least contribute to indicating where genuine competence lies and who has it and therefore to marking a neater distinction between experts and charlatans. This is why I am largely sympathetic to Quast's efforts, as it is clear that we need experts now more than ever.

It is for the same reasons, though, that I believe Quast's balanced account of expertise is on the wrong track. In this final section, I make two points to suggest how we should redirect our search for a better account of expertise. First, I explain why we need a more objective account of expertise. Second, I suggest an alternative way to look at the service experts are supposed to fulfill in our communities.

The first consideration is called for by the peculiar situation we're currently in. As I showed in §1, the functionalist spirit of the balanced account of expertise ends up undermining the very notion of objective expertise that Goldman has in mind when he argues that "being an expert is not simply a matter of veritistic superiority to most of the community. Some non-comparative threshold of veritistic attainment must be reached" (2001, 91).

Since Goldman admits that it might be difficult to determine where the bar has to be set, one might suspect the balanced account has a clear advantage over a purely objective approach to expertise, as on Quast's view being suitably disposed and willing to serve the need of a relevant contrast class is all it takes for one to achieve the status of an expert.

This is a mistake though because it is far from obvious that a novice or group of novices can reliably ascribe expertise to someone who is supposed to be more competent than they are in a domain. In other words, the more context sensitive and subject sensitive is the process of expertise attribution, the higher is the risk of misplacing trust in non-experts. This is an unwelcome consequence of the balanced account—a consequence that makes the account lose its alleged positional advantage over objective approaches to expertise.

Against the Balanced Account

My proposed epistemic consideration against the balanced account of expertise can be supported by a further reason for favoring an objective account of expertise—namely, the fact that this latter account provides a community with robust criteria for assessing who is

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to be trusted to deliver a service in any field. This translates into a practical advantage for the entire community, which can create ways to signal who and where experts are[6] and therefore help lay members navigate the current ocean of self-attributed competences and epistemic egalitarian ideals. Needless to say, this consideration does not suffice as a remedy against the detrimental effects of post-truth thinking; yet it should at least offer motivation for directing our efforts toward an objective approach to expertise rather than a "balanced" one.

The second consideration brings the distinction between primary and secondary competence back on stage. In a realist, or objective, approach, the attribution of expertise cannot depend on the specific function one is required to fulfill relative to some contrast class in a particular context. Some handy craftsperson who has learned how to repair the very same leaky drain pipe at one's home over the years does not count as an expert, because their competence is too limited and unreliable in similar situations in which a proficient plumber is expected to succeed.

Yet, an objective account is in a position to distinguish at least two broad kinds of expertise, namely the expertise of those who can reliably provide some sort of service in a domain and those who can explain what's going on in a domain to others, especially laypeople. Call the former *domain-oriented* expertise and the latter *novice-oriented* expertise.

The set of domain-oriented experts includes reliable plumbers, scuba divers, wine tasters, lawyers, doctors, musicians, and scholars, among others. Their expertise consists of an ability to serve the needs of a community in their respective domains—that is, what Quast calls primary competence. In particular, the function of domain-oriented experts encompasses two main roles:

> (i) that of *expert practitioners*, who address specific needs of the community members—for example, repairing leaky drain pipes, maintaining or restoring health, and performing jazz music; and
> (ii) that of *expert innovators*, whose job is to improve the community's capacity to serve the needs of their members by developing new resources, advancing the techniques, or carrying out groundbreaking research in a domain—for example, creating more-robust drain pipes, developing new therapies against cancer, or composing jazz music.

As should be evident, both functions demand that the subject have intellectual or practical dispositions to reliably deliver the required services. However, these roles are quite different, and not all expert practitioners are also expert innovators, and vice versa. Thus, any individual who fulfills either role possesses domain-oriented expertise.

[6] As Goldman points out, this is the role of academic certifications, professional accreditations, work experiences, and so on (2001, 97).

In contrast, the set of novice-oriented experts includes those individuals who have secondary competence, namely the capacity to help laypeople understand the services domain-oriented experts provide to the community. This set typically includes teachers and science popularizers, but all domain-oriented experts who possess a sufficient amount of secondary competence may have novice-oriented expertise too.

However, possessing domain-oriented expertise does not ensure that one also has novice-oriented expertise, as the wine-consultant and civil-engineer cases discussed in §2 demonstrate. For this service activates a different set of dispositions—namely, novice-oriented abilities, which are not strictly necessary for one to possess domain-oriented expertise.

Conclusion

The proposed categorization of the two main services experts fulfill in a community allows us to take into due consideration the functionalist element of expertise without giving up on an objective perspective that grants conceptual primacy to the dispositional component of expertise. We all wish to be surrounded by subjects who can offer clear explanations of how they are going to satisfy our needs, but we'd better also have an account that explains why some experts greatly serve the domain-oriented needs of our community without being able to serve the novice-oriented ones.

This is not only important for us to improve the explanatory power of our definition of expertise, but also for a community to evaluate how to deploy its resources to ensure that both kinds of experts are in a suitable position to fulfill their respective service function.

This reply to Quast's insightful paper aimed at shedding light on some limits of his account and sketching a strategy to accept Quast's suggestions about the necessary balance between a dispositional dimension and a functionalist dimension of expertise within an objective approach. Far from offering a comprehensive alternative account, I hope this reply can encourage others to address the important issues Quast has raised in his paper and can contribute to improving our understanding of the notion of expertise.

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