'Reason Trumps All: Rationality of Minority Views in Relevant Expert Consensus'

David Klier

Abstract. Expert consensus is crucial for those who are not relevant experts in the field in which they are studying. However, for those who are a relevant expert in the field of a philosophic subject, there is a debate that asks if a minority view can ever be considered rational. Bryan Frances argues that if one is a relevant expert in a field, and is in the minority, their views must be irrational. In this essay I will be arguing that Frances' argument fails in terms of the 'explanation' way, leading to leery acceptance of the 'no-process' way. I argue that relevant expert consensus does not matter; it is evaluating the argument that one makes. First, I discuss the debate on whether a relevant expert can disregard consensus and what a relevant expert is. Secondly, I deconstruct Frances' view charitably. Third, I analyze the issues with Frances' argument. Lastly, I offer an alternative to evaluating a minority view amongst relevant experts.

Introduction

Expert consensus helps those who are trying to make sense of something they are not themselves experts in. It can give a ballpark figure for just how the experts agree or disagree and helps to gather a better understanding of which way the proverbial chips have been falling thus far. But say you were in fact an expert in a specific domain or subject area, and also say that your view is in the minority. Does being an expert entitle one to disregard consensus among *other* relevant experts in your field?

Bryan Frances (2020) argues that it would be irrational to reject expert consensus. He argues that all the ways that someone does go about disregarding relevant expert consensus are irrational. Frances maps out three different ways that one might reject relevant expert consensus, the 'no-process' way, the 'explanation' way, and the 'moorean' way[1]. If Frances' argument is sound, this would imply that those in the minority would need to concede to consensus as their argument for defending why they disagree is irrational.

---

[1] Bryan Frances (2020) 'Is it Rational to Reject Expert Consensus?' *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 10 (3-4):325-345.

In this essay, I argue that Frances' argument fails, mainly by the means of the 'explanation' way of rejecting expert consensus. This would actually lead to a cautious acceptance of the 'no-process' way as well as a resulting reaction. I also argue that there is a better way to analyze a minority view; by the argument they put forward in the first place. I also briefly touch on the possibility of Frances' conclusions implying an ad populum fallacy.

The Disagreement of Expertise

If one is a relevant expert in a field, they might go about rejecting their peers' consensus by means of the 'no-process' way, the 'explanation' way or the 'moorean' way. The 'no-process' way of rejecting expert consensus is to acknowledge that one is in the minority and find that fact interesting, possibly, but not to let it have any influence on one's beliefs. The 'explanation' way is a means of disregarding consensus that someone reasons away why they would be in the minority upon acknowledgment of the fact, maybe they have some crucial piece of evidence the rest of the experts do not have. Lastly, there is the 'moorean' way, which, upon acknowledgment of being in the minority, one takes an evaluative stance. They give that the opponents to their view have a sound argument, but evaluate their own argument to be even *more* sound.[2]

One term here is incredibly important to define, namely, the term *expert*. More specifically, a *relevant* expert. For the sake of this paper, the terms expert and relevant expert may be used interchangeably. This being said, Goldman (2018) acknowledges that the term can be quite vague, but we can have some broad general categories by which to operate. These mainly being that an expert can be considered an expert if one has substantially more knowledge on a given subject than most other people, has better information on a given subject than most other people, or one that regularly aligns their beliefs with the best information

---

[2] Bryan Frances (2020) 'Is it Rational to Reject Expert Consensus?' *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 10 (3-4):325-345.

possible.[3] Given that we are in search of a *relevant* expert, we are going to be mainly working with the first and second definitions. A relevant expert then, is one that has substantially more knowledge, or better information, than most. We are excluding the last as we are looking at experts who are generating a view that is being rejected by the consensus, rather than someone who believes a view that has already been presented that happens to be in the minority.

This essay will follow the format of replying more specifically to Frances' argument. I will be developing an extraction of his argument, and explaining it. Commenting on each inference and premise, then I will explain what it might take for each premise to be false. I will then summarize where we have gotten, followed by my criticisms of Frances' argument. This section will have two primary arguments, the criticism of the argument itself, and offer an alternative method for evaluating arguments within the minority. This will finally be followed with my conclusions.

Frances' Argument for Irrationality

Frances argues that there are three main ways that someone might reject relevant expert consensus. The 'no-process' way, or not giving consensus much weight or importance, the 'explanation' way, or explaining why the majority is wrong, and the 'moorean' way, giving that the majority has a sound argument, but theirs is *more* sound.

Frances (2020: 6) places much more weight on the 'explanation' way and describes five species of explanations that may be used:

> "(E1) I have conclusive evidence for P, evidence that most other philosopher specialists (especially the ones who don't agree with P) either lack, have misjudged, or had the burden of weighing against misleading contrary evidence.
> (E2) The philosopher specialists who are most expert on P—the super-specialist-experts, if you will—endorse my belief P much more than they reject it.

---

[3] Goldman, Alvin (2018) 'Expertise' *Topoi* 37: 3-10.

(E3) The vast majority of philosopher specialists who appear to disagree with P don't really disagree with it.

(E4) There is some prejudice, selection effect, bias, or similar problem that is pervasive in the relevant community of philosopher specialists and has radically warped its evaluation of P away from what it should be given the evidence widely available to them regarding P.

(E5) When it comes to P, I am an epistemic superior to almost all of those philosopher specialists who reject my view. Perhaps I have crucial evidence they lack. Or maybe although I don't have crucial evidence they lack, I've evaluated our common evidence much better than they have."

Frances (2020: 14) then comes to conclude that all these ways are going to be irrational:

"Is their explanation, E1-E5, of the belief's minority status true? Answer: rarely… Is their belief in the explanation E1-E5 (epistemically) rational? Answer: rarely… Is their retaining their belief in P on the basis of their explanation belief E1-E5 rational? Answer: often… Is the retained belief in P rational? Answer: rarely… Is their overall response to learning S (a response which includes, as just one part, the retaining of P with no significant change in confidence) rational? Answer: rarely."

He also argues that the 'no-process' and 'moorean' ways are both going to be irrational as well. Frances (2020: 14) says in regards to the 'no-process' way:

"...it should be pretty clear to any philosopher that the truth of S—the claim that the philosophers who are specialist-experts on P and who reject P or at least lean towards rejecting P outnumber by a factor of about four or more (!) the philosophers who are specialist-experts on P and who accept P or lean towards accepting P—provides excellent evidence that the direction of the combination of available pro and con considerations regarding P is not in favor of P's truth."

And in regards to the 'moorean' way Frances (2020: 4) states (possibly in joust) :

"It's interesting that in some peculiar cases it appears to be epistemically rational to stick with a belief when presented with an objection to it that you admit that you can't answer at all."

Now let's take a look at a more full extraction of Frances' argument.

(1) The no-process way of rejecting relevant expert consensus disregards any conclusions the relative expert consensus may present as indicative of truth. (Basic)

(2) Disregarding any conclusions the relevant expert consensus may present as indicative of truth is irrational. (Basic)

(3) Therefore, the no-process way of rejecting relevant expert consensus is irrational. (Categorical Syllogism 1, 2)

(4) The explanation way of rejecting relevant expert consensus reasons away why the consensus is wrong. (Basic)

(5) The reasons given to reason away why the consensus is wrong are irrational. (Basic)

(6) Therefore, the explanation way of rejecting relevant expert consensus is irrational. (Categorical Syllogism 4, 5)

(7) The moorean way of rejecting relevant expert consensus is a higher evaluation of their previously made conclusions. (Basic)

(8) A higher evaluation of their previously made conclusions is irrational. (Basic)

(9) Therefore, the moorean way of rejecting relevant expert consensus is irrational (Categorical Syllogism 7, 8)

(10)   If all the ways of rejecting relevant expert consensus are irrational, then it is irrational to reject relevant expert consensus. (Basic, Implicit)

(11)   All the ways of rejecting relevant expert consensus are irrational. (Basic 3, 6, 9)

(12)   Therefore, it is irrational to reject relevant expert consensus. (Modus Ponens 10, 11)

This is a fair and charitable extraction of Frances' argument. Each inference seems valid with seven underived premises, with (11) being a simplification, or combination of (3), (6) and (9). I will now explain each underived premise.

For premise (1) (4) and (7) these are simply definitional premises. Each of these premises set the state of things for them to follow categorically to be irrational. Premise (1) describes what Frances calls the 'no-process' way, which in premise (2) he explains must be irrational. He states that one cannot simply disregard relevant expert consensus. For premise (5) we look at the 'explanation' way. Frances argues that none of these ways are going to be rational, because they simply are not true. Their explanations for why their minority status is correct is then unsound. In the case, say, that someone thinks they have more or better

information than another relevant expert, that that explanation is false because they are assuming that they are the experts' expert, so to speak, and that it would be impossible for other experts to not have the same information available to them.[4] For Frances, this explanation is not sufficient as it assumes incorrectly. In regards to premise (8) concerning the moorean way, Frances finds it irrational on the grounds that conflicting views cannot both be sound, but one to be *more* sound. The name the 'moorean' way, obviously deriving from G. E. Moore's famous thought experiment. Premise (10) is a little bit complex, as it is implicit. It is given that these must be all the ways that some expert might disregard an expert consensus. It is an important premise, however, because it leads to the conclusion that he does write about; namely, that rejecting expert consensus is irrational. This is important as it shows a difference between what he says, that these are the common ways that one might reject expert consensus, while concluding that it is more universally irrational to reject expert consensus.

Transition

As a quick recap, Bryan Frances thinks that rejecting relevant expert consensus is irrational. All three ways of rejecting it, the 'no-process' way, the 'explanation' way as well as the 'moorean' way all have issues that lead to irrationality. The 'no-process' way disregards consensus altogether, the 'explanation' way hand waves away consensus by propping themselves up as epistemically superior in some way, and the 'moorean' way actually gives that their opponents argument is sound, but that theirs is *more* sound. All of these ways, Frances claims, are irrational.

Next, however, I will be diving into a more original contribution to the discussion. I will be presenting a transparently rigorous argument in objection of Frances' view as well as offer up an

---

[4] Bryan Frances (2020) 'Is it Rational to Reject Expert Consensus?' *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 10 (3-4):325-345.

alternative method by which experts can analyze a minority view's arguments for retaining belief in said minority view.

The Problem With Frances' Argument

First I would like to commend Frances' argument. He has some really insightful arguments to be had in his article. In particular, his views surrounding the 'moorean' and the 'no-process' ways of rejecting expert consensus seem solid. It seems that if someone were to absolutely ignore expert consensus, they would in fact be acting irrational, as if one was to consider accepting expert consensus as an argument from authority, a *relevant expert consensus* is best considered to be a relevant authority which does in fact have merit. Thus, it should not be ignored outright. Furthermore, the view towards the 'moorean' way also has some strong merit. Primarily, I agree that two conflicting arguments cannot be both sound. If one argument concludes "God exists!" and another says "God does not exist!" One has to be unsound. It is a disjunct that either one or the other must be true, not one just being *more* true than another (such as the case of 'P ∨ ⌐P'). So, I also agree that the 'moorean' way of rejecting expert consensus would also be irrational.

This being said, however, I must contest the 'explanation' view. I will say that I agree if someone finds themselves epistemically superior, and that is their reasoning, it is irrational, however, there are other means to explain why your view, being in the minority, is still sufficient enough to disregard consensus.

Williamson (2011) notes that there was a study done within experimental philosophy (Shultz et. al (2011)) to see if any bias may occur by means of how one would respond to a thought experiment, given that it was presented in different ways, the study concluded that biases based on factors like socio-economic backgrounds, biases, as well as even just the order

the thought experiment was presented in, will have an effect on how someone answers.[5] Williamson (2011) says that this could have been easily explained because the experiment was not given to proper experts, and included people such as undergrads. What Williamson develops is the so-called 'expertise defense,' whereby experts are able to carefully check for biases in a given idea to verify truth, rather than confirmation bias. One could conclude that one of the skills held by experts in philosophy is to recognize biases in thought experiments.

On the other hand, Nado (2014) did some following up on Williamson's 'expertise defense' and found it to be lacking. She notes that in that same study, it showed that extraversion, and not expertise was the major factor in predicting whether one would be a compatibilist or not.[6] As such, in Nado's direct response to Williamson, I think this is a fairly damning presentation of Williamson's 'expertise defense.'

With this study in mind, it could very well be the case that the majority of experts are in one camp or another due to some bias or another. This being said, the expert in the minority might actually be recognizing these biases that could potentially cause a consensus. This is simply because of a societal bias, based on social norms that cause a certain sway within the expert consensus. As noted by Shultz et. al. in Williamson's article, that even cultural backgrounds were supposed to be shown to affect the bias. This means that the way our culture exists, what our shared values are, may affect an entire consensus of experts.

This being said, Nado does not think philosophers need to worry about this indicating that the philosophical method would be under threat from the findings. She suggests that there is a difference between the *actual* application and the *ideal* application of the method. This means we must be very careful in paying attention to our biases. We must strive to apply the philosophical method in its ideal form.

---

[5] Thomas Williamson (2011) 'Philosophical Expertise and the Burden of Proof' *Metaphilosophy* 42: 215-229.
[6] Jennifer Nado (2014) 'Philosophical Expertise' *Philosophy Compass* 633.

One other major aspect I would like to point out comes back to Frances' argument. He starts out stating that "...just like the Moorean way of responding to the discovery of minority belief, the Explanation way usually involves serious epistemic and/or alethic deficiency." (p. 15) The main point of emphasis that I want to point out here is on the word "*usually*." It seems that Frances demands a more universal outlook on the explanation way in his conclusions, which is in direct contradiction with his earlier findings. As such, my argument can be extracted one way as follows:

(13)   If the means of explaining away relevant expert consensus can only at most be usually irrational, then sometimes, the reasons to disregard relevant expert consensus are rational. (Basic)

(14)   If sometimes the reasons to disregard relevant expert consensus are rational, then relevant expert consensus can be disregarded. (Basic)

(15)   Therefore, if the means of explaining away relevant expert consensus can only at most be usually irrational, then relevant expert consensus can be disregarded. (Hypothetical Syllogism 13, 14)

(16)   The means of explaining away relevant expert consensus is the means of reasoning that can be true or false. (Basic)

(17)   The means of reasoning that can be true or false can only at most be usually irrational. (Basic)

(18)   Therefore, the means of explaining away relevant expert consensus can only at best be usually irrational. (Categorical Syllogism 16, 17)

(19)   Therefore, relevant expert consensus can be disregarded. (Modus Ponens 15, 18)

In examining some underived premises, we have premises (13) (14) (16) and (17). In premise (13) I am setting the stage underlying the crucial detail that Frances gives; namely that the explanation way can at the very least, be sometimes rational. For premise (14) I state this one primarily to show that if an argument for retaining belief in a minority view can be rational, then, as a relevant expert, the consensus can be disregarded, so long as they have the proper amount of expertise, as anyone else of relevant expertise. Premise (16) is a disjunct of all arguments, an argument can either be sound, or unsound. Premise (17) points out that an

argument, to be evaluated as true or false (sound or unsound) can't always be unsound, on the basis that if something is false, it has a converse statement that is sound. I later formulate a second argument stating that this evaluation is more crucial than any relevant expert consensus.

Evaluating Rejections to the Expert Consensus

Lastly, now that we have been able to show that it can be rational to disregard relevant expert consensus, what do we do to determine the rationality of the argument for disregarding said consensus? I claim that the argument itself is more important than any relevant expert consensus. Of course, this is granted that the one rejecting such consensus is *themselves* also a relevant expert. My argument, in extraction, is as follows:

(20)   The argument that one makes is the best means of considering something true or not. (Basic)

(21)   The best means of considering something true or not is more important than any relevant expert consensus. (Basic)

(22)   Therefore, the argument that one makes is more important than any relevant expert consensus. (Categorical Syllogism 20, 21)

As a simple categorical syllogism, the argument here has 2 underived premises. Starting off with (20) we are trying to decide what the best means of considering something as true, or sound or not is. The argument itself is the best source of evaluation. The source of evaluation is the best way to really evaluate whether it is rational or not, and so, we must look at their argument. In premise (21) I explain that if we are trying to consider something as true, or sound or not, we must value that above all else, even expert consensus. We are trying to evaluate the rejection, not take expert consensus as indicative of rationality of the minority. This leads categorically, then, into my conclusion that we must look at the rejections argument for rejecting, not any relevant expert consensus.

At this last point, I would like to briefly cover whether Frances has committed an ad populum attack. In short, no, Frances' arguments were directed towards evaluating the rejections arguments for rejecting a consensus. However, I do think that if we take Frances' argument as fully sound, then it *implies* that ad populum would be an effective means of evaluating whether the minority's belief is sound. Ad populum is not an effective means of evaluating whether the minority's belief is sound. Therefore, we cannot take Frances' argument as fully sound. This is what leads me to a soft acceptance of the 'no-process' way of rejecting expert consensus. If we are not using the expert consensus to evaluate the reason for rejecting the consensus, then we are not committing the implied ad populum. Of course, this is only a soft acceptance of it as I do still agree with Frances that it's not an argument for rejecting the consensus in itself.

Some follow up questions that one might ask that are pertinent remain. A major one is questioning who should be doing the evaluating? Should a third party expert evaluate their arguments? The expert in question, in defense of their view from the consensus' scrutiny? Or, is it the consensus that should be evaluating the opposition? If it's a third party expert, how do we ensure an unbiased answer? These and more are beyond the scope of this essay.

Conclusions

As we have seen, Bryan Frances advocates that all reasons to reject relevant expert consensus are irrational. The 'no-process' way, the 'explanation' way and the 'moorean' way, he thinks, have too many faults to overcome. The 'no-process' way seeks to carry on as if they never knew the consensus, creating no argument, making it irrational. The 'explanation' way, he thinks, considers themselves as epistemically superior, or just allows them to be psychologically comfortable with believing something in the minority, which is irrational. The 'moorean' way gives that the majority has a sound argument, but that theirs is *more* rational, which in itself is irrational given that two conflicting views cannot be both rational.

We noted, however, that while he may have a point when it comes to the 'no-process' and 'moorean' ways, there are times where the 'explanation' way has merit. In specific, in noting that biases can play a factor in a consensus. Since philosophers work very hard to try and eliminate these biases, when one is entertained by the consensus, the minority may be the ones who actually notices it. This means that their explanation would be rational to conclude that the consensus must be wrong.

Then I carried on to explain that the most important aspect to consider when evaluating whether someone's argument for disregarding expert consensus is rational or not, is an evaluation of their argument. The argument Frances advances implies that if one's view is in the minority, then it's irrational. However, that is not always the case, and we must continue to evaluate the arguments on a case by case basis as to why consensus is rejected, presenting an argument for say, why something is a bias. For the argument is stronger than the consensus.

References

Frances, Bryan (2020) 'Is it Rational to Reject Expert Consensus?' *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism 10 (3-4):325-345.*

Goldman, Alvin (2018) 'Expertise' *Topoi 37: 3-10.*

Nado, Jennifer (2014) 'Philosophical Expertise' *Philosophy Compass 631-641.*

Williamson, Thomas (2011) 'Philosophical Expertise and the Burden of Proof' *Metaphilosophy 42: 215-229.*