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Balancing the Normativity of Expertise

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In his paper “Towards a Balanced Account of Expertise” (2018) Christian Quast aims “to argue against a widespread tendency to conflate expertise with either the individual possession of relative competences or a certain role ascription” (2018, 397). Instead, he claims “that an expert’s role, competence, and the manifestation of expertise are mutually interdependent” (2018, 397). However, Quast’s aim is not just to illuminate the notion of expertise—in addition, he is after larger game: along the way of explicating the notion of expertise he wants “to shed light on how the hitherto isolated debates in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences largely neglect their deeper interrelation” (2018, 397). Thus, Quast sees his balanced account of expertise as an exercise in social epistemology understood as an interdisciplinary discipline.

In this comment, I will show in which way Quast’s balanced account of expertise sheds light on interdisciplinary debates and conflicts between these disciplines. I will confine myself to the debates and conflicts between philosophy and sociology because as far as I see the pertinent struggles as regards social epistemology concern these disciplines and, in addition, because I know more about the relationship between philosophy and sociology than their relationship to psychology. In order to see how Quast’s balanced account of expertise can shed light on debates between these disciplines it is necessary to ask what exactly Quast aims to balance. Where, so we must ask, exactly is the conflict between philosophical and sociological approaches to expertise such that we need a balance at all?

My answer to this question will be that in fact Quast tries to balance the *normative* implications of expertise as they are understood differently by philosophers and sociologists. In this sense, Quast’s work can be seen as an attempt to reconcile—for the case of expertise—the roots of deep struggles between these disciplines that historically define their unsettled relationship. Therefore, in this comment I aim to set Quast’s account in a wider context and provide a kind of meta-comment: since there already exists a critical comment on Quast’s balanced account (cf. Croce 2019), a further detailed analysis of potential problems is not necessary.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Normativity of Expertise**

Expertise is a normative concept. To say that somebody is an expert in a specific domain is to say that she is able to do or knows things *better* than non-experts.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this normative aspect does not imply that being called an expert is as such a praise. Obviously, this depends on whether what somebody is able to or knows better is itself a good thing: surely, noticing Anders Behring Breivik’s being better able to kill kids without remorse—and in this sense calling him an expert—does not imply praising his expertise. ‘Expertise’ is

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<sup>1</sup> In this way, I want to meet the request by Adam Riggio, who asked me for this comment, set in his invitation-mail: “Think of ways to open the dialogue to new territory, ideas or directions the author may not have considered. I’m not a fan of the point-by-point rebuttal—it narrows one’s thinking too much.”

<sup>2</sup> The fact that I introduce this aspect of the normativity of experts in this way by relating the competences of experts and non-experts should not suggest that having the competences required for the normative ascription depend on the existence of non-experts with lesser competences: of course, the normative ascription would remain in case the expert is the only one who has competences in the domain at issue at all.

therefore not an honorific term per se, but nevertheless a normative term expressing *better* ability or knowledge in a domain than the laymen's (whether we value or disdain the ability or knowledge in that domain). This normative aspect of expertise is very often spelled out in the current debate by analyzing expertise as "the individual possession of relative or extraordinary *competences*" (Quast 2018, 398).

Quast explicates this dimension of expertise—and with it this *normative* dimension—by introducing what he calls "the *dispositional*-sense of expertise [...]: (Expertise<sub>D</sub>) In one sense of the term, 'expert' or 'expertise' applies to someone who is suitably disposed to succeed in matters of a restricted domain of (intellectual and/or practical) activities" (2018, 398). Obviously, this explication aims to capture the normative dimension just discussed: What does it mean to say that Stephen Hawking, Lionel Messi and Anders Behring Breivik are suitably disposed to succeed in matters of a restricted domain of activities? Well, Hawking is *good* at physics, Messi is *good* at football and Breivik is, alas, *good* at killing without remorse. And, it seems, they are so just by focusing on their *individual* possession of the disposition at issue.

There is another aspect of the normativity of expertise that we capture best by focusing on an example mentioned by Robert Merton in his seminal essay on the ethos of science. In discussing the normative structure of science Merton, as is well known, distinguishes between the institutional imperatives of universalism, communism, disinterestedness and organized skepticism. The second of these imperatives means that the "substantive findings of science are a product of social collaboration and are assigned to the community" (1942, 121).

In order to show that this imperative of communism is in fact a norm guiding science, Merton mentions the reaction to a violation of the imperative:

Secrecy is the antithesis of this norm; full and open communication its enactment. [...] A scientist who does not communicate his important discoveries to the scientific fraternity—thus, a Henry Cavendish—becomes the target for ambivalent responses. He is esteemed for his talent and, perhaps, for his modesty. But, institutionally considered, his 'modesty' is seriously misplaced, in view of the moral compulsive for 'sharing the wealth' of science. Layman though he is, Aldous Huxley's comment on Cavendish is illuminating in this connection: "Our admiration of his genius is tempered by a certain disapproval; we feel that such a man is selfish and anti-social" (1942, 122).

The ambivalent normative reaction to Cavendish reflects, on the one hand, the already mentioned normative dimension of expertise captured in the dispositional-sense: the admiration for Cavendish's talent and genius is an admiration of his scientific abilities and competences. On the other hand, the negative reaction of Huxley points to the fact that Cavendish failed to follow the requirements of a social norm that is, according to Merton, inherent in science: the scientist has the responsibility to inform fellow scientists and, in fact, society as a whole about her discoveries. It is her *duty* as a member of the scientific

community to communicate her scientific insights to others.<sup>3</sup> Merton’s remarks about the ethos of science are *cum grano salis* transferable to all cases of expertise: Being an expert means having specific duties.

Of course, Quast also captures this normative dimension of expertise. He does so by introducing “the *functional*-sense of expertise [...]: (Expertise<sub>F</sub>) In a third sense of the term, ‘expert’ or ‘expertise’ applies to someone who is set to play a special service role in a restricted domain of (intellectual and/or practical) activities” (2018, 399). As Quast himself notes, this functional sense of expertise cannot easily be reduced to the dispositional sense and the reason is the normative, deontic requirements of expertise captured by focusing on the service function experts should fulfill (2018, cf. 405).<sup>4</sup> Quast’s argument here consists in the claim that “[o]nce expertise is properly ascribed, having expertise can be lost despite remaining highly competent” (2018, 405).

The ambivalent normative reaction to the case of Henry Cavendish shows that—even if we remain agnostics about whether Quast correctly captures the concept of expertise by his analysis—Quast’s claim is right in its *normative* component: Huxley can *admire* Cavendish’s competence and at the same time *disapprove* of his non-fulfillment of the service-function of scientists. This shows that there is a normative aspect of expertise that is not simply captured by the *individual* possession of a disposition. The ascription of expertise implies the ascription of a specific *social role* to play.

Thus, in balancing the idea of expertise consisting in the individual possession of competences and the idea of expertise as a certain role ascription Quast actually is trying to balance the *normative* aspects of expertise: Focusing on individual competences captures the idea that experts are *good* in what they are doing; focusing on role ascriptions captures the idea that experts have *duties* and *responsibilities*.

### **Balancing the Normativity of Expertise**

Now, how does Quast aim to balance these normative aspects? How is it that “the dispositional and functional dimensions of expertise ascription, which were originally introduced as separate matters, are conceptually interwoven” (2018, 407)?

Having a look at the two normative aspects of expertise outlined above, there seems to be a very straightforward answer how the normative aspect captured in the dispositional sense and the normative aspect captured in the functional sense relate to each other: Isn’t it simply

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, this duty is not unrestricted but can come into conflict with several other scientific and non-scientific duties. In the case at hand, the duty of open communication of scientific results can conflict with the duty to avoid giving people easy opportunities to harm other people (e.g. weapon scientists are prone to such a conflict) or with duties as an employee towards the employer (these conflicts between secrecy and open scientific communication obviously play a role in industrial research). The question how to evaluate such conflicts is a major issue in science ethics, of course.

<sup>4</sup> Quast focuses on the accountability of experts whereas my example from Merton focuses on the informational duty of scientists/experts, but this difference is not important in this context, where my aim is simply to show that Quast also subscribes to the deontic aspect of the functional sense of expertise.

the case that we have the possibility of blaming Cavendish for violating his duty as a scientist only *because* he has the competences we ascribe to him? Doesn't his duty simply *stem* from his competences—from the fact that he is *good* in science?

In fact, Quast seems to make this simple thought explicit in his paper. His balanced account consists in maintaining that “someone is an expert only if she is undefeately disposed to fulfill a contextually salient service function adequately at the moment of assessment” (2018, 413). We can say, to come back to the example of Cavendish, that he is blamed for having such a disposition to serve but not manifesting it. Though, in this way, explicating expertise via a higher-order disposition to serve, Quast's account nevertheless allows for a relationship between first-order competences and the service function: “that expert dispositions are plausibly understood with reference to a service function—as the higher order disposition to serve—does not undermine the fact that the ascription of this *function* usually depends on the prior recognition of ordinary *competences* to do. Therefore, the *conceptual* dependence between an expert's dispositions and function allows for an *epistemic* priority of ordinary competence to which advocates of competence-driven accounts can legitimately refer” (2018, 412). My thesis is that here we find the balance of the two *normative* aspects of expertise: Cavendish has the *duty* to communicate his results *because* he is *good* in science. His duty *stems* from his competences but is not reducible to them.

### Tempering the Struggles Between Philosophy and Sociology

Setting Quast's account in the wider context of the normativity of expertise does show how he aims to integrate *individual* and *social* aspects of the concept of expertise. But it does not by itself show how he can “shed light on how the hitherto isolated debates in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences largely neglect their deeper interrelation” (2018, 397). In fact, Quast only mentions the fact that “[l]acking proper awareness of the other dimensions of expertise ascription, particularly philosophers and psychologists are often attracted to reductionist views according to which the role or function of experts can be fully explained in light of the possession of suitable dispositions” (403).

By rejecting such reductionist ambitions and arguing for his balanced functional account, Quast aims to show the interrelation between the mentioned individualistic conception prevalent among psychologists and philosophers and the social-role accounts favored by social scientists. But, I maintain, we can only understand properly how Quast's project fits into the discipline of social epistemology understood as an *interdisciplinary* endeavor if we emphasize more strongly than Quast that his balance is between *normative* aspects of expertise. A look at the special relationship between sociology of (scientific) knowledge and epistemology/philosophy of science will help to explain what I mean.<sup>5</sup>

One of the founding documents of what has become known under the label ‘sociology of (scientific) knowledge’ (SSK) is surely David Bloor's *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. It aims to set out the so-called ‘Strong Programme in Sociology of Knowledge’ and its impact can best be understood by focusing on its treatment of epistemic normativity. Traditional sociology of

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<sup>5</sup> I mention two relationships—between sociology of knowledge and epistemology as well as between sociology of scientific knowledge and philosophy of science—in the same breath because both relationships are entangled with each other from a historical point of view.

knowledge (e.g. Karl Mannheim) and traditional sociology of science (e.g. Robert Merton), so Bloor's story goes,<sup>6</sup> lacked nerve and hesitated to sociologically investigate the true and the rational contents of scientific knowledge by confining themselves to either the sociological investigation of beliefs outside science (Mannheim) or the institutional setting of science (Merton).

Bloor's strong programme, instead, sets out to equip the sociologist with nerves of sociological steel and undermine the motivation for such hesitation. He believes that only such a strong programme can accommodate the naturalistic and scientific ambitions of sociology as an empirical discipline.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Bloor's insistence to search for the *causes* of beliefs is an expression of this scientific attitude. Importantly, Bloor does not allow for an explanation of belief by *epistemic reasons* if these very reasons are not to be understood as *social causes*.<sup>8</sup> Bloor, we can say, aims at a new foundation for sociology of knowledge by reducing epistemic normativity to socio-causal factors.<sup>9</sup>

As is well known, Bloor's programme did not meet with approval among most philosophers. Although many focused on attacking the explicit relativistic implications of the programme, what to my mind stands behind most attacks is Bloor's social reductionism about epistemic normativity. By and large, more naturalistically inclined philosophers tended to rebut Bloor's reduction to *social factors* whereas non-naturalistically inclined philosophers attacked Bloor's *reduction* to social factors.<sup>10</sup> Until today, philosophers attack Bloor's ideas by rejecting his identification of epistemic reasons with social factors and arguing that nothing prevents the former to cause beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Now, it is possible to extend the story of the struggle between Bloor and his critics to the struggles between sociology of knowledge and epistemology at large. By and large, sociologists of knowledge denied epistemic normativity an explanatory function in sociological research if such normativity is not manifested socially. And by and large, epistemologists aimed to investigate epistemic normativity without brute sociological reduction of reasons to social causes. A lot of struggle in the so-called Science Wars can, I assume, be explained by focusing on this question of the role epistemic normativity is supposed to play in our ambitions to knowledge.

Viewing the discipline of social epistemology as an interdisciplinary endeavor that does not simply equate epistemic normativity with social causality as well as takes seriously the genuine social conditions of such normativity can help to bridge the gap that has been spawned between the disciplines of philosophy and sociology. By emphasizing more strongly than Quast that his balanced account in fact balances the *normativity* of expertise, we can now

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<sup>6</sup> "The cause of the hesitation to bring science within the scope of a thorough-going sociological scrutiny is lack of nerve and will" (Bloor 1991, 4). See for a criticism of Bloor's failure-of-nerve-thesis: Seidel 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See Bloor 1991, 160f. See also Barnes 2011 for the programme's scientism.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Bloor 1984.

<sup>9</sup> See Seidel 2014, 82-85.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. Hollis 1982, Laudan 1984, McMullin 1984, Worrall 1990, 315f.

<sup>11</sup> See Boghossian 2006, 113, 117. Obviously unaware of his predecessor, Boghossian thus reiterates Laudan's argument (1984).

explain how his account aims at showing the interrelation of the isolated debates in sociology and philosophy: as Quast argues philosophically and/or psychologically reducing expertise to individual competences is myopic since it loses sight of the deontic—and thus normative—dimension of expertise ascriptions (cf. 2018, 403ff.).

So that we can interpret Quast's stance now, simply equating expertise with the communal ascription of a social role risks losing sight of the normative aspect competence-driven accounts emphasize and, in this way, risks a social reductionism of epistemic normativity. Quast, therefore, can in fact aim to appease the struggles between sociological and philosophical approaches in epistemology because he tries to balance the two normative dimensions of expertise that fall in view of researchers in these disciplines and withstands reductionist tendencies that defined said struggles. Whether he succeeds in this aim depends on how convincing his balance is for the participants in both camps—but, I fear, that does not just depend on how convincing Quast's account *really* is.<sup>12</sup>

## Summary

In this comment, I tried to show that it is fruitful to emphasize more strongly than Quast the fact that his balanced account actually balances the *normativity* of expertise. Since, so I argued, the struggles between the disciplines of sociology and philosophy can *cum grano salis* be seen to revolve around the question how to treat normativity in epistemological contexts, this focus sheds light on Quast's aim to provide an interdisciplinary account.

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<sup>12</sup> Trying to balance between sociological and philosophical approaches in epistemological contexts, is a walk on a tightrope: I fear that Quast will be attacked from *both* camps. As I know from my own experience in the debate about relativism in sociology of science (see Seidel 2014), trying to integrate intuitions from both sides of a heated dispute often does not convince either side. One blames the account as too sociologicistic, the other as too philosophical.

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