EPISTEMIC AUTHORITIES, PREEMPTION AND PREDATORY BEHAVIOR

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Abstract: As laypersons in most domains of investigation, we often rely on epistemic authorities to form our beliefs about the world. How should we respond to finding out an epistemic authority's opinion on a given matter? Are we permitted to diverge from her, or must we always follow her lead, making her opinion our own? In this paper, I offer a partial defense of the Preemption Thesis, according to which one may rationally disagree with epistemic authorities only in a limited range of cases. My strategy is threefold. First, I formulate a more delimited version of that thesis. Second, I defend an argument presented in its favor by Jan Constantin and Thomas Grundmann from some objections leveled against it by Jennifer Lackey. Finally, I argue that accepting that version of the Preemption Thesis does not commit one to suffer in the hands of predatory epistemic authorities.

Keywords: epistemic authority, preemption thesis, defeatist preemptionism, predatory authorities

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1. Introduction

There are three main questions one might ask about epistemic authorities. First, one might be interested in understanding what they are. Second, one might want to know how to identify them. Third, one might be concerned about how to respond rationally to the fact that they have certain beliefs about propositions in their respective domains of expertise. I will take for granted that there are many clear cases in which we can safely and somewhat easily identify when someone is an epistemic authority. This paper concerns the third question, asked from the point of view of a layperson who wishes to have epistemically appropriate opinions about some domain of investigation.

In the next section, I will specify what I mean by epistemic authorities. For now, you can think of them as experts in a given domain of investigation. There are two main sorts of answers to the question of how a layperson ought to respond to finding out that an epistemic authority believes that *p*, where *p* is a proposition within the authority's domain of expertise. According to the Total Evidence Thesis, endorsed, for example, by Lackey (2018), the layperson ought to evaluate *p* by taking into account the totality of the evidence available to her. The fact that the epistemic authority believes that *p* is just another reason to be taken into account by the layperson. On the other hand, according to the Preemption Thesis, the layperson ought to form her belief concerning *p* chiefly by relying on the fact that the authority thinks that *p*, since most of the remaining evidence available to the layperson will be screened off or preempted.

What does it mean for some piece of evidence to be screened off or preempted? If one's evidence regarding *p* has been preempted or screened off, then it is irrational to use it in assessing whether *p* (Constantin and Grundmann, 2018). Such evidence has no epistemic weight neither for nor against *p*. According to the Preemption Thesis, then, epistemic authorities hold the power to make one's evidence epistemically unreachable. The layperson might still be able to entertain a screened off piece of evidence, but she would be violating the demands of rationality if she used it in forming her beliefs.

The text will be structured in the following way. In Section 2, I will provide a definition of the notion of epistemic authority. In Section 3, I will very briefly present and justify the credal framework that I will presuppose in the paper. In Section 4, I will formulate Constantin and Grundmann's version of the Preemption Thesis. In Section 5, I will present their argument for it. In Section 6, I will respond to a couple of objections raised against such argument by Jennifer Lackey.

In Section 7, I will present Lackey's argument against that thesis. In Section 8, I will show why Lackey's argument fails.

2. Epistemic Authorities

The point of this section is to explain how I will use the term *epistemic authority* in the rest of the paper. I do not expect it to match how other philosophers use it, though there will be clear similarities. The definition I will provide is intended to be stipulative, and its main purpose is to aid me in formulating the version of the preemption thesis which I find most promising. The main feature of that definition is that its extension is narrower than usual (which in turn will make the scope of my preferred version of the preemption thesis narrower than other versions).

The definition I will provide bellow is intended to capture asymmetric epistemic relations between persons who have sparse information about some domain and persons who have extensive knowledge and competence in it. We commonly find ourselves in the lower end of such relations in everyday life. There is too much that we do not know, and thus we need to rely on experts for forming beliefs about their respective domains, if we are to do so in a responsible fashion. Asymmetric epistemic relations of this sort are sufficiently important for them to merit our focused attention.

In keeping with the literature[2], I will take the notion of epistemic authority to be a ternary relation between two persons and a domain of expertise. I borrow most of the following definition from Constantin and Grundmann (2018). Let A and L be persons, and let D be a domain.[3] A will be said to be an epistemic authority for L regarding D if and only if L is a layperson regarding D and L has good reason to think that A is an expert regarding D. Further, A will be said to be an expert regarding D only if A has a substantial amount of true beliefs about D in virtue of having special competence in evaluating the large body of evidence about D at her disposal. This necessary condition should make it clear that I am interested particularly in how laypersons should respond to experts satisfying objective criteria similar to the ones proposed by Goldman (2001).

The above definition is narrower than usual in two respects. First, if someone is an epistemic authority for you regarding D, then you are a layperson regarding D. Laypersons are the sort of persons that enter into the relation of epistemic authority with someone else which they have reason

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[2] See, e.g., Jäger (2016).

[3] I will follow Constantin and Grundmann (2018, p. 4118) in taking the domain of an epistemic authority to be a set of propositions "that are best accessible via specific methods". I will sometimes write that someone is an authority regarding a given proposition to mean that she is an authority in some domain to which that proposition belongs.

to believe is an expert in some domain. Thus, the epistemic asymmetry in authority relations, as I've defined them, is quite vast. Second, to the extent that not every expert in the ordinary sense has a substantial amount of true beliefs about her domain of expertise, the definition above does not capture every kind of epistemic relation between laypersons and experts in the ordinary sense. For instance, since most philosophers probably don't have a substantial amount of true beliefs in their domains of research, they don't count as experts in philosophy and, thus, don't enter into authority relations *qua* epistemic authorities in philosophy (at least not in the way I am using these words). This is as it should be, since I will be defending that laypersons ought to defer to epistemic authorities, and simply deferring to a philosopher is not how a layperson should form her beliefs about philosophical matters.

Finally, I want to highlight a consequence of the definition given above that is important for understanding the thesis that I will discuss in the following sections. Note that, if A is an epistemic authority for L, then L has good reason to think that A is an expert and, therefore, to think that A has access to a large body of evidence as well as superior reasoning skills for appreciating the weight of that evidence. Since L is a layperson, she should always assume, unless she has reason to think otherwise, that A is in a better position than her to find the relevant evidence and to evaluate it properly.

3. Credences

Before finding out what are the beliefs of an epistemic authority in some field, a layperson might already have opinions of her own that clash with those of the authority. This can happen in two importantly different ways. First, the epistemic authority might believe that p, while the layperson might believe that not-p or suspend belief on whether p. Second, they might both hold opinions on p, but have different levels of confidence in p. Following Jäger (2016), we might call the first kind of disagreement *strong*, and the second *weak*. Full or qualitative beliefs do a good job of capturing strong disagreements. However, it is also important to know what is the rationally appropriate response for a layperson who only weakly disagrees with an epistemic authority. To capture such weak disagreements, we need the more fine-grained conceptual framework of partial or quantitative beliefs, called *credences*.

If A is an epistemic authority for a given layperson and p is a proposition, I will write "$c_A(p)$" for A's credence in p, where c_A is a function which assigns a real number in the interval $[0, 1]$ to each proposition towards which A has an opinion. So the term "$c_A(p)$" denotes a value between 0

and 1 inclusive, whenever it is defined. The question I am interested in can be formulated as follows: confronted with an epistemic authority regarding p, should the layperson assign $c_A(p)$ to p?

4. Defeatist Preemptionism

Constantin and Grundmann (2018) offer their version of the Preemption Thesis as an answer to that question. They named it *Defeatist Preemptionism* (DP). The thesis I will discuss in this section is not strictly the same as the one formulated by them, since the term *epistemic authority* features in its formulation, and I use it differently than they do. The following thesis, which mirrors DP in every other respect, is narrower in scope than DP. Accordingly, I will call it *DP⁻*. Let A be an epistemic authority for L regarding D such that p is in D. According to DP⁻, if L finds out that A's credence in p is $c_A(p)$, then:

(1) L has a reason for assigning $c_A(p)$ to p;

(2) every domain-specific evidence E regarding p is screened off from L's evaluation of p, but only if L has no reason to believe that A has ignored E.

Some remarks about the scope and some of the consequences of DP⁻ are in order to avoid misunderstanding. First, only L's domain-specific evidence is screened off from consideration. In deciding what value to assign to p, L is permitted to take into account non-domain-specific evidence regarding p. Why should the scope of DP⁻ be restricted in this way? Well, if A is not an authority outside D, the fact that A is an authority *in D* is not a reason for L to think that A is better than her at collecting and assessing evidence *outside D*. Second, if L does have a reason to believe that A has ignored some domain-specific piece of evidence E, then E will not be screened off from consideration. This is a desirable consequence of DP⁻. After all, if A has not taken E into account in evaluating p, then $c_A(p)$ will not accurately reflect all of the available evidence. Third, if all of the evidence relevant to evaluating p is domain-specific, and if L has no reason to think that A has missed some of the evidence, then the only non-screened off reason regarding p is the authoritative reason for assigning $c_A(p)$ to p, in which case L is rationally required to adopt the same credence as A.

5. The Argument from Irrationality

Constantin and Grundmann (2018) offer an argument for DP which is in many respects similar to the Track Record Argument, advanced by Linda Zagzebsky (2012) in support of her own

preferred version of the Preemption Thesis.[4] I will call Constantin and Grundmann's argument *the Argument from Irrationality*. It supports DP⁻ at least as much as it supports DP. The gist of it is that it is irrational for a layperson to deviate from an epistemic authority, for the layperson has reason to believe that the authority is better equipped than she is at evaluating the relevant evidence and, thus, has reason to believe that the authority's credence reflects the evidence better than hers would.

Their argument can be reconstructed in the following way. Let L be a layperson, let A be an epistemic authority for L with respect to some domain, let p be a proposition within that domain, and let E be a piece of domain-specific evidence for or against p which is available to A and which would be preempted according to DP⁻. Now suppose L found out that A's credence in p is $c_A(p)$. Here is the argument:

(1) Suppose, for *reductio*, that L is allowed to take E's weight into account in assessing p.

(2) Then, no matter how small E's weight might be, L's credence in p will be different than $c_A(p)$.

(3) However, since A is an authority for L, by our definition L has reason to believe that A is better than she is at both collecting the relevant evidence and evaluating it.

(4) Thus, L has reason to believe that, given the evidence, $c_A(p)$ is more accurate than her own credence in p.

(5) Therefore, L's credence in p will be different than a credence which she has reason to believe is more accurate than hers given the evidence.

(6) But then adopting the less accurate credence would be irrational.

(7) So she is not allowed to take E's weight into account in assessing p.

Again, this argument is somewhat different than the one proposed by Constantin and Grundmann (2018), given my stipulative use of *epistemic authority*. This difference will mostly not matter in the following sections, and where it does I will briefly address it. It is worth noting that the argument above is correct if the original one is, and it might be correct even if the original one is not.

6. Objections to the Argument from Irrationality

Lackey (2021) poses a number of challenges to the Argument from Irrationality. This section presents responses to two of them. Lackey's first challenge is a denial that (2) follows from (1). Her argument for this denial is that, even if the layperson assigns some weight to E, the layperson might

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[4] Zagzebsky modeled her argument for the Preemption Thesis after Joseph Raz's argument for a similar thesis concerning practical authorities. Cf. Raz (1988).

still always adopt $c_A(p)$ by assigning sufficient weight to the reason provided by the epistemic authority. However, while assigning sufficient weight to the authoritative reason could very well be enough to guarantee that the layperson adopts the authority's full or qualitative belief, it is not at all clear how it could guarantee that the layperson adopts $c_A(p)$. How could E have some weight and, at the same time, not affect the layperson's credence at all, not even by a tiny amount? Indeed, the layperson would assign $c_A(p)$ to p only if, after giving E some thought, she discarded it altogether, which would have the same result as endorsing DP⁻.

Before getting into Lackey's second challenge, let us recall that, in those cases in which the only relevant evidence is domain-specific and the layperson has no reason to believe that the epistemic authority A has ignored some relevant piece of evidence, DP⁻ requires the layperson to adopt all of A's credences within A's domain. According to Lackey's second challenge to the Argument from Irrationality, then, instead of always adopting A's credences as required by DP⁻, it would be more rational for the layperson to either (i) adopt all of A's credences except when she knows that A is wrong or (ii) adopt all of A's credences except when she is sure that A is wrong. Each strategy would be superior to simply mimicking A's credences, because the layperson would potentially avoid some of A's inaccurate credences. This objection can be seen as a denial that (4) follows from (3).

However, neither strategy is viable. There are two issues with strategy (i). First, in most cases, the layperson is simply not in the position to *know* that A is wrong about p. Indeed, as pointed out by Stewart (2020), the fact that an epistemic authority believes that p would seem to defeat most claims to knowledge that the layperson could have. The second issue with strategy (i) is that, if we consider the steep epistemic asymmetry which characterizes how I am using the term *epistemic authority*, it is hard to imagine how someone who has relatively poor access to evidence and relatively poor skills at assessing it could *know* that the relevant expert is wrong in any interesting case. Of course, Lackey did not have my stipulative usage in mind when she first objected to DP. Still, this second issue is worth point out if only to illustrate how the more restricted version of DP can be more easily defended than the original one.

The main issue with strategy (ii) is that it wrongly assumes that, if the layperson is sure that A is wrong about p, then the layperson is more likely than A to be right about p (Grundmann, 2021a). But that is clearly false. Grundmann (2021a) rightly points out that laypersons quite often hold false beliefs about which they are nevertheless certain. Additionally, a layperson's confidence that some epistemic authority is wrong is often a function of the layperson's own ignorance about

that authority's domain. It is hard to see how a layperson's subjective certainty could amount to a viable strategy for forming credences in any domain of research.

7. The Argument from Predatory Authorities

Besides raising the above objections to the Argument from Irrationality, Lackey (2021) has also offered an argument against DP, which I will explain in this section. I will call it *the Argument from Predatory Authorities*. In the next section, I will show why it fails. The argument employs the useful notion of a predatory epistemic authority, characterized as an epistemic authority that commits immoral acts against laypersons by abusing her epistemic authority over them. Lackey gives us three striking examples, one of which involves an American gynecologist who used his medical expertise to sexually assault thousands of patients over a period of 30 years.

I will frame the Argument from Predatory Authorities with this medical example in the background, although its conclusion is much more general. Let A be an epistemic authority regarding Gynecology. During an appointment with his patient, A behaves in a clearly inappropriate manner. The patient expresses her concern, but A assures her that the procedure which he is about to perform is standard practice. It turns out that it is not standard practice. A intends to sexually assault her. Let p be the proposition that the procedure is standard practice. According to Lackey, DP entails that the patient has no choice other than to assign $c_A(p)$ to p, since p is within the domain of Gynecology. Whatever reasons the patient might have against p, they would be screened off by A's credence in p. And because p seems to imply that the procedure would not constitute sexual assault, according to DP the patient would be rationally required to believe that A will not sexually assault her. But if that is what DP entails, Lackey argues, then it ought to be rejected.

8. A Response to the Argument from Predatory Authorities

If the Argument from Predatory Authorities were sound, it would be a fatal blow to DP⁻. Fortunately for DP⁻, however, the argument misses its mark. To see why, it will be useful to distinguish two sorts of cases. In the first sort, A begins to sexually assault the patient and only then tells her that he is doing nothing more than a regular medical procedure. In the second sort of cases, A tells his patient that he is about to perform a regular medical procedure, but then he proceeds to sexually assault her.

Let's start with the first type of case. According to Lackey, DP⁻ entails that the patient would be rationally required to believe that she is not being sexually assaulted by A, since A told her that the procedure is standard practice. There is an easy – perhaps too easy – way out of Lackey's argument. If you read the formulation of DP⁻ in Section 4 carefully, you will notice that it applies to a layperson only if she finds out what the authority's credence towards the relevant proposition is. And *finds out that* is a factive expression.[5] If S finds out that q, then it is true that q. Going back to Lackey's argument, it is not the case that A is confident that he is doing nothing more than a regular medical procedure, despite his saying so. Indeed, A is lying to cover his predatory behavior. It follows that the patient cannot find out that A is confident that he is doing nothing more than a regular medical procedure.[6] Thus, DP⁻ does not apply to this sort of case, and the patient is free to make use of further evidence in her assessment of the situation.

Lackey might complain that my objection is based on a technicality. Perhaps we should not use factive verbs in the formulation of DP⁻. Perhaps DP⁻ should apply to the layperson whenever she has good reasons to believe that A's credence in p is $c_A(p)$. But even this version of DP⁻ would not apply to the layperson in the sort of case I am now considering. Recall that A begins to sexually assault the patient *before* telling her that there is nothing wrong with the procedure. So by the time A lies to cover his predatory behavior, the patient will have plenty of reasons to believe that she is being sexually assaulted by A, and thus not to take his words at face value. She would be right to be skeptical that what comes out of the physician's mouth accurately reflects his beliefs. Since she would have no good reason for believing that A is confident that there is nothing wrong with the procedure, this slightly modified version of DP⁻ would not apply to her.

I've just said that the patient would have plenty of reasons not to take A's words at face value. It is important to see that such reasons *would* be available to her according to DP⁻. She would acquire them *before* A's telling her that the procedure is regular. The result is that she would have no good reason to believe that A is confident in what he is telling her. Therefore, DP⁻ would not get to the point of being applied to the situation, and the question of which reasons were screened off would not come up in the first place.

Let us now consider the second kind of case, in which A tells the patient that he is about to perform a regular medical procedure and then proceeds to sexually assault her. One might think that, in such cases, the patient would have no reason to doubt that A is telling her the truth. After all,

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[5] In their formulation of DP, Grundmann and Constantin (2018, p. 9) write about "A's known belief that p", and Grundmann (2021a, p. 140) talks about "discover[ing] that an epistemic authority believes that p". Both *know* and *discover* are also factive verbs.

[6] In other words, since A is not confident in that proposition, the patient cannot find out that he is.

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in hearing that it is a regular procedure, there is still no sign that A is about to sexually assault her. Thus, DP⁻ would seem to require that the patient adopt $c_A(p)$, because further domain-specific evidence would be screened off, including whatever evidence the patient would acquire as soon as A's true intentions became clear. It would appear, then, that DP⁻ has no way of handling this second type of case. The patient would have no rational choice but to be highly confident that she will not be sexually assaulted, and she would have no way of revising that credence as new evidence becomes available to her.

But that does not follow from DP⁻. Suppose A tells the patient that the procedure he is about to perform is completely standard. And suppose that he then proceeds with his predatory behavior. Let p be the proposition that the procedure A is performing is completely standard. The following line of reasoning, which the average person could go through intuitively in a matter of seconds[7], is open to the patient:

(1) Either he is assaulting me, or he isn't.

(2) If he isn't, then he will tell me that p.

(3) If he is, then he will also tell me that p.

(4) Either way, he will tell me that p.

(5) So his telling me that p, by itself, is no reason to believe that he is not assaulting me.

Note that none of the premises are domain-specific. (1) is a logical truth. (2) and (3) are pieces of folk psychology. In particular, (3) is justified by our common knowledge of how predatory behavior typically works. (4) follows from (1), (2) and (3). Finally, (5) follows from (4) and from the non-domain-specific principle that, if a piece of evidence gives equal support to conflicting hypotheses, then it cannot be used by itself to judge which of them is true. The above chain of reasoning shows how DP⁻ makes room for the patient to make rational use of domain-specific reasons when facing predatory epistemic authorities. DP, after all, does not have the grim consequences attributed to it by Lackey.

9. Conclusion

My aim was to show that DP⁻ is a reasonable response to the question of how a layperson ought to respond rationally to finding out an epistemic authority's credence in some proposition p within her domain. According to the Argument from Irrationality, it would be irrational for the layperson to assess p by taking into account any domain-specific evidence regarding p, provided

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[7] Indeed, the gist of the argument could be summarized in the following sentence: *But he would say that anyway*!

that the layperson has no reason to think that the epistemic authority has ignored such evidence. I showed why a couple of objections that Lackey raised against that argument fail. I also discussed the Argument from Predatory Authorities, which is designed to raise serious problems for DP⁻ in cases in which an epistemic authority attempts to commit immoral acts by abusing his epistemic standing over laypersons. I argued that DP⁻ leaves open to potential victims enough resources for them to defend themselves against predatory epistemic authorities.

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