Social Epistemic Warrant? You're Covered!

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Abstract: In a recent paper in this journal, Hrishikesh Joshi (building on Ava Thomas Wright) argues that unless experts are seen to address even poor objections to their views, laypeople and experts lose warrant to believe claims about topics in expert domains. Warrant for such beliefs rests on our capacity to trust the experts, but we lose our grounds for such trust in the face of objections we do not see properly addressed. In response, I argue that if the threat were as great as Joshi thinks, it could not be neutralized, because we're no more able to assess the adequacy of responses to objections than we are to assess the quality of the objections themselves. Fortunately, I argue, the threat is not one we need a response to: our warrant in expert testimony is underwritten by a conditional closely analogous to Goldberg's coverage-conditional.

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As many philosophers have emphasized, laypeople are often forced to rely on experts for knowledge in many domains, including some domains that matter greatly for how we should act. Trusting well, and in the right people, is therefore essential. But trust makes us vulnerable, and too often pseudo-experts rush to take advantage of us.

Philosophers have put forward a variety of criteria we might utilize to distinguish reliable experts from charlatans and unreliable contrarians (e.g., Goldman 2001; Anderson 2011; De Cruz 2020). We might not be able to assess experts' first-order claims for ourselves, but we can assess their track record (of publication and of prediction), their argumentative performance, and so on. Hrishikesh Joshi (2025) does not aim to contribute directly to this debate. Rather, he argues for a background condition that must be satisfied if laypeople are to be justified in trusting experts: objections to their claims, no matter how ill-judged, must be seriously entertained and answered by experts. Unless this condition is satisfied, laypeople lack what Joshi calls *social epistemic warrant* for believing these claims, where social epistemic warrant is the only warrant we laypeople can have with regard to them. In making this claim, he builds on Wright (2021), but he goes further than she does, arguing that an absence of engagement threatens even *expert* warrant.

In this paper, I will briefly set out Joshi's argument for why serious engagement with objections is required for lay and even expert warrant in scientific claims. I will then argue that if his argument succeeds, matters are worse than he thinks: if serious engagement is

required for social epistemic warrant in these domains for the reasons Joshi offers, then laypeople can never be warranted in thinking that appropriately serious engagement has actually taken place. Fortunately, I will argue, much less is actually required of experts than Joshi thinks, and laypeople can be justified in trusting experts even when objections to their claims go unanswered. A coverage principle, akin to that developed by Sanford Goldberg (2010), entails that experts need not respond to objections that are irrelevant, in bad faith, or ill-thought out.

Social Epistemic Warrant and the need to respond to objections

In *On Liberty*, Mill famously argues that we can be assured of the truth of our beliefs only if they can and do withstand contestation with rivals. Because we may fall into error despite our care, because even a false doctrine may nevertheless capture an overlooked truth, and because we cannot grasp our own views as living truth unless we revivify their grounds through contestation, we can have the "rational assurance of being right" only when there is "[c]omplete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion" (Mill 2008: 24). This argument remains influential in the case against censorship.

As Wright points out, however, Mill restricts the scope of this argument: Engaging in debate is needed for rational assurance in the truth of claims about such subjects as "morals, religions, or politics," but it is not required when it comes to scientific subjects (Wright 2021: 6-7). Experts can establish the truth of scientific claims on the basis of scientific evidence and good reasoning alone: on these topics, there is no need for an ongoing contestation of ideas. If censorship of contrarian scientific claims and objections to consensus theories is epistemically impermissible, it cannot be for the reasons Mill appealed to in order to show there must be a complete liberty of contradicting non-scientific opinion.

While it is true (according to Mill and Wright) that scientific experts are entitled to rational assurance in the domains of their expertise on the basis of the first-order evidence alone, however, lay people cannot have warrant in the same beliefs on the basis of the first order evidence. Lay people lack the capacity to understand and process such evidence sufficiently well for such a kind of warrant. As Wright puts it (2), they lack "direct evidentiary warrant" for their beliefs in these domains. Rather, lay people can have knowledge about these domains only via warranted trust in the experts who possess direct evidentiary warrant. If and when we trust such experts appropriately, we will possess what Wright calls social testimonial warrant in scientific beliefs. For that trust to be warranted, however, we laypeople must be assured that "experts can answer all objections that might undermine the positive, direct evidentiary proof of their expert scientific knowledge." Since, however, we non-experts "cannot distinguish objections that might undermine such expert proof from those that do not," not even bad objections can be censored (Wright 2021: 7).

Mill, and Wright following him, are concerned principally with the upshot of this argument for censorship. The conclusion on which they focus, that is, is that objections (even bad objections), cannot be censored if lay people are to have social testimonial warrant for scientific beliefs. Joshi (2025) extends this argument in two ways. First, he argues that since social testimonial warrant is grounded in the rational assurance that experts can actually rebut objections, good and bad, we must see evidence of such rebuttals, and that requires that experts actually (and publicly) engage in such rebuttal. "[S]uch warrant can only be had if experts are disposed to respond to objections." Censorship, even of contrarian science and bad objections, undermines lay warrant because warranted trust in experts requires that we see them rebut objections, and we cannot tell which objections are bad.

Further, Joshi extends Wright's argument beyond *lay* dependence on social epistemic warrant. He argues that even experts depend on this kind of warrant, and even with regard to some of the questions within the domain of their expertise. The need for social epistemic warrant even for experts arises from the fact that expertise is highly specialized. Experts are experts within "sub-sub-fields", not in domains as broad as, say, climatology or molecular biology. Experts possess direct evidentiary warrant *at most* for very narrow claims within their sub-sub-field.[1] As a consequence, even experts can have knowledge only if they trust well. They, too, are dependent on social epistemic warrant, and in the same sort of way as laypeople. They, too, lack the capacity to assess first-order claims outside the domain of their expertise, and they, too, often lack the capacity to distinguish good arguments from bad. They, too, have grounds for trust only if objections, including poor objections, are seriously addressed by those with the requisite expertise. Unless even poor objections are fully addressed, *everyone* loses social epistemic warrant, and knowledge crumbles away almost everywhere.

Joshi concludes that if laypeople and experts are to retain knowledge, even poor objections must be addressed. But if he's right in the reasons he offers for this conclusion, we're even worse off than he thinks. If a failure to address even poor objections threatens knowledge because we can't assess the quality of objections for ourselves, then we can't retain knowledge *even when* experts address these objections. If we can't distinguish poor objections from good ones, then we can't distinguish adequate responses to objections from obfuscating bullshit. If our knowledge is threatened by knowing that for all we can tell, good objections are simply being dismissed out of hand for want of an adequate

[1] Elsewhere I've argued that even within their own domains, expert beliefs rest partially on social epistemic warrant, since experts utilize tools they do not fully understand to analyze data gathered together with others and in the light of theories they could not have developed on their own (Levy 2021). If that's true, then even the very narrow knowledge that Joshi takes to survive in the absence of trust is threatened by its loss.

response, then our knowledge is just as surely threatened by knowing that for all we can tell, good objections are being met with smoke and mirrors. Our lack of expertise undermines our capacity to assess the adequacy of responses to objections at least as surely as it undermines our capacity to assess the quality of objections. If Joshi's right that a failure to address even poor objections threatens knowledge, then social epistemic warrant fades away no matter how experts respond to objections.

Ignoring objections and retaining knowledge

Joshi argues that the social epistemic warrant of *both* lay people and experts rests on being able to see for ourselves that experts can successfully rebut even bad objections. I've suggested that matters are worse than he thinks: if our warranted trust in experts rests on our seeing that they succeed in rebutting objections, we cannot have it at all, whether or not we're poisoned by the "toxic epistemic gas" of censorship. Fortunately, there's an alternative route to securing social epistemic warrant, I'll now argue (though it is not a route that gives us everything that Joshi seems to want). Non-expert knowledge can be "coverage-supported" (Goldberg 2010: 154) in the absence of exposure to, or even the existence of, such responses.

Coverage, as Goldberg presents it, consists in the assurance that *if p were true, I would have heard about it by now* (157). Beliefs are coverage-supported in virtue of facts about agents' epistemic community: there must be a set of informants within that community who can be relied upon rapidly to discover and report facts like *p*, and those informants must have a broad reach, including the persons whose beliefs are coverage-supported. When these conditions are satisfied, the agent can dismiss the claim that *p* (when it emanates from someone outside that set), on the grounds that these informants have not reported it.

Notice that the person who dismisses a report that *p* on these grounds can do so without needing first to hear from informants they know to be reliable; they may appeal to what

these informants would have said, and how that information would have circulated, were the report true. Equally, lay knowledge about claims within expert domains may be coverage-supported in the absence of awareness of rebuttals to objections from the experts. The layperson can appeal to an analogue of Goldberg's coverage conditional: *if that were a good objection, it would have been appropriately addressed by now*.

We can appeal to Goldberg's original coverage conditional only if we are warranted in believing *that that news would have circulated by now*, and therefore in believing that news like *that* would rapidly be uncovered and disseminated. We can appeal to the social epistemic warrant-supporting conditional only if we are warranted in believing the following three claims:

(1) Were that objection worth addressing, it would have been addressed;
(2) Were that objection good enough to bring about a change in expert opinion; it would have brought about such a change;
(3) Were the objection to bring about a change in expert opinion, I would have heard about it by now.

Agents may justifiably believe (1) if they are justified in believing that the experts are reliable in uncovering and addressing objections worth taking seriously. They may justifiably believe (2) if they are justified in believing that experts are reliable in updating their beliefs in response to evidence. They may justifiably believe (3) if they are justified in believing that changes in expert opinion circulate widely and freely. Justified belief in (1) and (2) depends on facts about experts. Justified belief in (3) depends on facts about the wider epistemic community as well as experts. If agents justifiably believe (1)-(3), they need not see objections actually addressed. Indeed, even strong evidence that an objection has not been addressed by the experts wouldn't threaten social epistemic warrant, when we justifiably believe that *were* the objection worth addressing, it would have been.

May agents justifiably believe (1)-(3)? If we're justified in believing that the experts are reliable, then we're justified in believing that (1) and (2) are true. Were we not justified in believing (1) and (2), we would not be justified in believing that the experts were reliable, since we would have no grounds for thinking that experts' opinions reflect the total evidence available to them. Since we have social epistemic warrant for believing claims within expert domains only if we are justified in believing the experts are reliable, the fact that we have social epistemic warrant for these claims entails that we are justified in believing (1) and (2).

Our having social epistemic warrant for believing claims within expert domains also entails that we are justified in believing (3) with regard to some (and only some) objections. For agents justifiably to believe (3), it must be true that we would hear about a change in expert opinion were it to occur, and that's the case only for some such changes. Some changes in opinion are too insignificant and some topics too esoteric for agents justifiably to believe that the media would rapidly report on them.

Suppose I stumble across a YouTube video arguing that the IPCC has got its estimate of equilibrium climate sensitivity (the amount of warming caused by a doubling of CO_2) wrong; it's not a range between 2.5 and 4 degrees Celsius, but actually between 2.45 and 3.98 degrees Celsius. While climate sensitivity is an important issue, I wouldn't be justified in dismissing the video's claim on coverage-supported grounds. For all I know, the claim reported might be true, and the consensus in climate change research might have changed since the last IPCC report. I have no reason to think that any such change would have been widely and rapidly reported. It's too insignificant to attract media attention. Equally, were a video to adduce (apparent) evidence that the Bronze Age eruption of the Santorini volcano occurred around 2500 BCE, and not between 1627 and 1600 BCE as previously claimed (Friedrich et al. 2006), I couldn't dismiss it on coverage-

supported grounds: I have no grounds for believing that any change in scientific opinion on this relatively esoteric topic would have been widely and rapidly reported.

In this light, we should qualify the scope of coverage support for our capacity to dismiss objections. It's not a qualification that limits its importance, though. We cannot appeal to coverage to dismiss objections to scientific claims concerning matters of little public interest, or the precise details of claims that receive public attention. We can, though, appeal to coverage to protect our social epistemic warrant in the broad outlines of those beliefs that are central to public policy and on the basis of which we lay people make decisions concerning how to act. Coverage protects social epistemic warrant when and where it really matters.

Coverage and merited trust

Mill, Wright, and Joshi argue, or are committed to thinking, that lay people are warranted in trusting experts only when they are confident that the experts respond appropriately to objections, and we can be so confident only when experts actually and publicly respond to objections, good and bad. I've argued that we can be warranted in trusting experts when we may justifiably believe that experts *would* respond to objections were these objections worth responding to, and that when these objections force an expert rethink, we would rapidly learn about it. It's important to recognize, however, that this appeal to coverage does not give us what these thinkers appear to want.

Mill, Wright, and Joshi believe that experts merit trust only when we lay people can see for ourselves that they merit it; that is, they commit to an internalist condition on trust. On their view, as I understand, we must have access to evidence of their trustworthiness. It's important to recognize that coverage (in contrast) is a reliabilist principle. A belief is coverage-supported when it is *actually* the case that conditions (1)-(3) are satisfied, and in addition that the experts in which we trust are genuinely reliable. Agents may wrongly

take themselves to have coverage support for their beliefs, when they are wrong about the reliability of the experts in forming or updating their beliefs in response to genuine evidence, or wrong about the reliability of the epistemic environment in circulating news of such updates. On some reliabilist views (though not Goldberg's own), agents may be nevertheless justified in their beliefs when such failures are local and the experts and encompassing environment are otherwise sufficiently reliable, though of course on all views such failures will entail a lack of knowledge.

Mill, Wright, and Joshi might therefore find the appeal to coverage unsatisfying: it doesn't give them the internal access they take to be needed for warranted trust in experts. There may be no relevant internal difference between the agent who appeals to coverage to dismiss bad objections to good science, and the agent who makes the same appeal to dismiss good objections to bad science. We may join these thinkers in finding this unsatisfying, but we must learn to live with this inability to ground trust in experts in such internal evidence. The need for trust in experts and their findings is pervasive and ineliminable, especially for lay people but also for experts themselves (see Levy (2023)for further discussion). Of course, we can adduce some indirect evidence for the reliability of science in general (see Oreskes 2019; Vickers 2023; Longino 2002, for discussion of the conditions that must be satisfied for science to be reliable).

Interestingly, Mill himself seems to have anticipated and dismissed an appeal to something like a coverage principle. An "enemy of free discussion" may insist that there is no need for lay people to know and understand the responses of experts to objections, he writes; "it is enough if there is always somebody capable of answering them." ((Mill 2008: 43). Mill, and Wright (11-12) following him, argue that we cannot hope to conceal knowledge of objections from the public, and that attempts to do so would themselves risk undermining social epistemic warrant. These responses are irrelevant to the coverage principle. It does not require that efforts are made to prevent objections from reaching

our ears or that responses to them be available only to the elite. Rather, it maintains only that we need not witness or hear of such responses in order to be justified in thinking that *if that were a good objection, it would have been appropriately addressed by now*.

Mill, Wright, and Joshi all argue that we lay people (and – on Joshi's view – experts too) can be warranted in our scientific beliefs only if objections, including bad objections, are not censored, because our rational assurance that the experts are reliable rests on seeing them respond to such objections. I've argued, in contrast, that our scientific beliefs are coverage-supported, and such support does not require that we witness such responses, or even that there *are* any such responses. Rather, our warrant depends on our justifiably believing that *if that were a good objection, it would have been appropriately addressed by now*. It is a further question whether coverage is compatible with censorship. While coverage plausibly demands that ideas circulate freely, to secure the sort of epistemic environment in which it is true that (a) objections reach the ears of experts, so that they are able to respond to them appropriately and (b) expert responses disseminate quickly and rapidly enough for us to be warranted in believing the coverage conditional, prima facie coverage seems compatible with some degree of censorship. For example, my beliefs may be coverage-supported even when I know that certain objections cannot be posted on social media or aired in the mainstream media, and even when I am unable to respond to these objections myself. So long as I justifiably believe that the experts have considered these objections and found them wanting, such censorship need not affect my warrant for our beliefs.

That being the case, if censorship in such cases is wrong (epistemically or morally), it is not because it undermines our social epistemic warrant in scientific beliefs. We need not

witness experts responding to objections (good or bad) to be able to dismiss them. We're covered against epistemic harm via that route.[2]

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