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Reading the Signs: From Dyadic to Triadic Views for Identifying Experts

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ABSTRACT
A naturalistic approach to expert-identification begins by asking, 'how do novices pick out putative experts?' Alvin Goldman and Elizabeth Anderson, representing a fairly common approach, consider agents' psychological biases as well as social situatedness. As good as this is, culture's role in shaping cognitive mechanisms is neglected. An explanatory framework that works well to accommodate culturally-sensitive mechanisms is Peircean semiotics. His triadic approach holds that *signs* signify *objects* to *interpreters*. Applying the triadic model to expert-identification: novices interpret signs of expertise as pointing to particular experts. The main advantage of the framework is that it is significantly more nuanced than the Goldman-Anderson model in describing how agents identify experts. It explicitly accommodates cultural and agential differences in expert-identification. It also explicitly admits the possibility of rational disagreement in assessment of evidence for expertise. But these advantages come at a cost. Namely, it's difficult in theory – as well as practice – to make one's way into the semiotic system of someone from another culture to help guide them away from fraudulent experts. Even so, it's a trade-off worth making since it organizes relevant details for expert-identification, which is a first step in sketching a better normative theory.

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1. Introduction

Most astrologers can't claim to have influenced foreign policy, but Joan Quigley is an exception (Blessing and Waddler 1988; Roberts 1988). She was the secret, unofficial astrologer to Ronald and Nancy Reagan. According to Reagan's former Chief of Staff, all major decisions were made in consultation with Quigley (Regan 1988). She drew up horoscopes to help determine optimal timing for major political decisions. It's reported that she informed the White House of when they should bomb Libya and announce Reagan's bid for reelection. Even before his time in DC, Ronald Reagan put his trust in astrologers, scheduling his swearing-in as governor of California at 12:10 am in order to take advantage of planetary conditions.

The Reagans had had a longstanding interest in astrology. According to one source in the *Washington Post*, astrologers in the 1930s and 40s – when the Reagans were in Hollywood – were ordinary, respected folks. Hardworking people reading the future in the stars. However, the Reagans deepened their commitment in the early 1980s. Ted Koppel reported that an astrologer warned Nancy Reagan that something terrible would happen on 30 March 1981, the day John Hinkley Jr. shot President Reagan. After this incident, reports suggest that the Reagans started soliciting opinions of astrologers more frequently.

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Now to many hard-nosed naturalists, this is beyond odd. And even the more pluralistically minded might raise an eyebrow at the Reagans' predilection for prophesy. Didn't Augustine settle the issue almost two millennia ago?

What might be hard in light of these revelations is that the Reagans weren't irrational in their day-to-day affairs. Some policies – trickle-down economics and mandatory minimum sentences for drug possession, for example – were socially and morally brutal. But still, they had honest-to-goodness *reasons*. On the face of it, this is a puzzling situation, wavering between astrologers and military strategists.

A moment's reflection suggests that their situation dramatizes our own – all of us have at one time or another put our faith in the wrong people. It's a question about trust in experts: why do any of us trust the experts we trust?

There are two ways we can go about answering this question. The first begins with an idealized view of experts and expertise and then measures our own practices against it. This is what we find in Alvin Goldman (2001) and Elizabeth Anderson (2011)—what I'll be calling the 'Received View'. More details to come, but the big idea is that there is a set of markers out there in the world by which we can sort trustworthy and untrustworthy experts.[1] The second begins with how people do in fact identify experts and then reverse-engineers the process. Spoiler: I'll argue that the second way gets us a more complicated but ultimately more useful picture of how to identify experts.

The Received View is an instance in what Fuller calls 'inside-out' social epistemology. It's worth quoting Fuller in full:

> According to the inside-out strategy, knowledge is posed as a problem for each individual to solve by approximating a standard to which the cognitive agent may or may not have conscious access. There is no sense that epistemic access may be a scarce good, with one agent's access to knowledge perhaps impeding, competing with or making demands on the epistemic access of some other agent. This would be more in accord with the outside-in strategy. Here the cognitive agent is portrayed as choosing between one of two or more alternative research trajectories, fully realizing that resources are limited and that other agents will be making similar decisions at roughly the same time. (2002, xii)

The Received View organizes the problem of identifying experts in such a way that it's a problem for *individual* cognizers. What's external to the agent can be counted among the epistemic inputs but there's an underlying presumption that access to relevant information and ways in which agents process that information are irrelevant in important ways. An outside-in approach, by contrast, begins with differences in epistemic access. Differences might be a matter of accessing information. Or, differences might be a result of ways that sociocultural influences shape cognitive processes. There's been a lot of inside-out work on expertise, but comparatively little outside-in. This is a first attempt at an outside-in characterization of expert identification.

The roadmap: I'll lay out the Received View and offer some criticism. After introducing a few conceptual tools – most important of which is the triadic semiotic relation – I'll spell out my own view. The argument for it is just that it incorporates more of the facts into how people identify experts and provides a scaffold for a more nuanced discussion of expert identification.

An important and frustrating caveat: the objection and position I'll develop here are sketchy at best. Put in its Sunday best: the paper is programmatic. It sketches problems and ways forward, but nothing with certitude. Despite this, I'm hopeful that the sketch includes a kernel of something useful.

2. The Received View

Questions about what constitutes an expert have been with us for centuries (Watson 2021). Recently, Goldman and Anderson have provided lists of criteria by which to identify experts.[2] Goldman (2001) says that the hallmarks of an expert within a domain include:

(1) Having arguments supporting their own views and critiquing their rivals;

(2) Being in agreement with other experts;
(3) Are positively appraised by 'meta-experts';
(4) Making transparent their interests and biases and
(5) Having a good track record.

The details here aren't the issue. One can, of course, ask about the status of meta-experts or come up with precise ranges of values for an acceptable track record. But those are niggling worries.

Anderson (2011) takes a similar tack. Rather than a checklist of features, she offers a to-do list:

(1) Create a hierarchy of experts;
(2) Search for evidence of dishonesty;
(3) Assess the expert's epistemic responsibility and
(4) Look for expert consensus.

She argues that anyone with an 8th-grade education and internet access can do pretty well to reliably identify trustworthy experts. We can inquire about details, just like with Goldman, but it's not the details that matter to us right now. What matters are three important background assumptions.[3] They are:

> **Methodological Naturalism**: at a minimum, epistemological theorizing is constrained by findings in the natural sciences; our epistemological conclusions cannot be inconsistent with our psychological findings.
>
> **Non-natural Meaning**: evidence identifying experts as experts is non-natural in Grice's (1989) sense.
>
> **Objectivism about Justification**: the justificatory force of some bit of information for some belief is independent of the needs and interests of the community. (cf. Boghossian 2006, 22)

A few words about each of these. First, **Methodological Naturalism** reflects a trend in epistemology to be informed by the sciences, seen in the likes of Goldman, Quine and Kornblith, among many others. As you might expect from terms like 'method' and 'natural', this claim can take on a variety of interpretations – some stronger and some weaker. To be as inclusive as possible, I'll opt for the weaker sense: Norms of expert identification are constrained by our best psychological science. A ready-to-hand example is Brennan's (2020) extension of Anderson's views. Brennan notes that novices often go wrong in identifying experts because of cognitive biases. Despite this, there's evidence for cautious optimism. The negative effects of biases can be mitigated using a variety of metacognitive strategies. Brennan doesn't advocate this as a cure-all, but he does note that it gives us *some* hope in the fight against bad epistemic practices.

Now consider **Non-natural Meaning**. The argument here is straightforward. The meaning of evidence indicating expertise is either natural or non-natural. There's no way that a person's argumentative and rhetorical skills mean they are an expert in the same way that smoke means fire – that's to say it's implausible that it should be natural. So, it has to be non-natural.

A fast rejoinder is to say that the natural/non-natural distinction doesn't apply in this case. The distinction, one might argue, applies to linguistic meaning and not evidence for expertise. But it's hard to see why the distinction can't be extended to evidence for believing something about an individual. A fever is a (natural) sign of infection; using 'yous' as the second-person plural is a pretty good (non-natural) indicator of coming from New Jersey. Furthermore, it's common to talk about the meaning of evidence. Talk about signs and credentials of expertise is commonplace.

Finally, **Objectivism**. This is a fairly common position in the epistemology literature.[4] Boghossian (2006) describes it as part of the 'Classical Picture of Knowledge'. Minimally, this means that the epistemic force and direction of the evidence don't depend on the agent or agent-dependent facts for their force and direction. If some collection of evidence E points to an expert A, then it doesn't matter whether Jack or Jill or Jerry (all rational agents let's suppose) is exposed to E. If E is evidence that A is an expert, then Jack and Jill are epistemically in the right when they regard A as an expert;

and, Jerry is in the wrong when he fails to appreciate *E* indicates *A* is an expert. **Objectivism** stands in contrast with 'Constructivism about Justification', which maintains that justification depends on local interests and needs.

3. Worries About the Received View

The Received View is attractive insofar as it has the potential to weed out unfit experts and elevate genuine authorities. It may not work perfectly, but that's OK. 'Good enough for government work', as the older folk say.

The trouble, however, comes with **Objectivism about Justification** and **Methodological Naturalism**. Namely, there's a great deal of work in cultural psychology suggesting that the ways in which people reason about evidence varies reliably among subcultures. You don't even need to go to something as exotic as hunter-gatherer tribes. You can find reliable differences in people in the U.S. raised upper-class versus middle-class. That's to say, taking **Methodological Naturalism** seriously requires a major overhaul of **Objectivism about Justification**.[5] The evidence for this lies with ongoing research in encultured cognition.

Two major frameworks for classifying cultures seem to dominate presently. The first is the individualist-collectivist axis (Triandis 1995). Members of individualist cultures tend to prioritize the good of the individual over the good of the group. They are typically characterized by 'analytic' thinking – a tendency to slice up information into smaller and smaller chunks for consideration. Uniqueness, self-reliance and independence are the main cultural values. In contrast, members of collectivist cultures tend to prioritize the good of the group over that of the individual. The second axis distinguishes cultures along the line of *tight* and *loose* (Gelfand 2018). Tight cultures tend to have harsh sanctions for rule-breaking, clear expectations for social behavior, greater social order and greater closed-mindedness. Singapore is a fine example of a tight culture. Loose cultures, in contrast, have milder sanctions for rule-breaking, vaguer expectations of behavior (i.e. norms say what citizens *can't* do as opposed to what they *should* do), less social order and more open-mindedness. Canada is a loose culture. These two axes intersect: tight-individualist (Germany), tight-collectivist (South Korea), loose-individualist (United States), and loose-collectivist (Brazil).

Why the short lesson in cultural psychology? It's because there are systematic differences among cognitive styles of people of different cultures. For instance, tight cultures are characterized by adherence to rules. In Germany, it's common to find people waiting for the crosswalk light before crossing the street, even if there are no cars nearby. In the United States, it's common to find people crossing the street without the light. Even consider pieces of conventional wisdom. In the highly individualistic US, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. In collectivist Japan, the nail that stands out gets pounded down.

This means that if we're to have a naturalistic social epistemology of expert identification, then the resulting account *cannot* be culture-independent. Looking at individual and social psychology only gets us a part of the picture. Both of these need to be set against the background of culture. The choices we make reflect the cultural values in which we swim.

Cultures are not neatly decomposable entities. They spill across and vary within political boundaries. So, when the account of expert identification that we're developing indicates that culture is a necessary ingredient, it's not just about *American* or *Nigerian* heuristics for attributing expertise. Rather, it's about how *blue-collar Americans* or *Catholic Americans* attribute expertise. Expectations and judgments around expertise and authority aren't borne on the sleeves of evidence. It's interpreted by consumers of that information.

What are the upshots of this move? First, individuals from different cultures, as a default disposition, evaluate information differently and relate to others differently. Both of these are crucial for a culturally-sensitive and empirically-informed social epistemology. Galinsky et al. (2008) asked participants to complete a boring task. One group was primed by having them think about a time when others had control over them. The other group was primed by having them think about a time when they had control over others. Those who thought about being controlled were more likely to agree with positive sentiments about the boring task compared to folks who thought about a time when they had control over others. The priming task reflects class differences: working class folks are often directed and controlled by others at their places of work. Upper class folks are the ones who typically do the directing and controlling. The findings suggest that working class Americans are more likely to conform to already-expressed opinions compared to wealthier Americans. This is a class-based difference in dispositions for deference. So, when epistemologists are thinking about how to evaluate some bit of reasoning, the social class from which people come is an important part of understanding the mechanics underneath the bit of reasoning.

Second, assessment of some bit of reasoning as rational or not depends in part on the cultural framework used to assess that bit of reasoning. For instance, Peng and Nisbett (1999) found that Chinese undergraduates, compared with students at the University of Michigan, are much more willing to accept that two pieces of seemingly conflicting information can both be true. This stems, in part, from the differences between ancient Greek and ancient Chinese philosophy. Aristotle tells us in *Metaphysics* 1011b 23–25 that there's no intermediate between contradictions and that this is apparent from the nature of truth and falsity. Contrast this with verses from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapters 36 and 37:

> To shrink something
> You need to expand it first
> To weaken something
> You need to strengthen it first.
> Tao invariably takes no action,
> And yet there is nothing left undone

This difference is often captured by 'analytic' and 'holistic' styles of thinking. Analytic styles of thinking tend to isolate pieces of information and consider them on their own before thinking about them in a broader context. Holistic styles tend to consider all the information at once and then make a judgment (or not).

So why does the social epistemologist concerned with assessments of expertise care about this? It's because attributing expertise depends on evaluating the evidence, and processes of evidence evaluation are sensitive to cultural context. Enculturation matters for the social epistemologist. That's to say, following **Methodological Naturalism** into the domain of enculturation leads to constraining **Objectivism**.

Now how might **Objectivism** be curtailed? One way is suggested by Boghossian (2006): reasoning about culture-independent facts like the mass of the earth or the number of moons of Jupiter falls within the scope of **Objectivism**. But when we reason about evidence and signs that are culturally-dependent in some important way, then **Objectivism** doesn't apply. Thinking about the meaning of 'colorless green dreams sleep furiously' – namely, whether it's meaningful at all – happens in English-speaking cultures, but not outside them. Judgments of the sentence's meaningfulness aren't within the scope of **Objectivism**. This is consistent with universality for reasoning about heliocentrism or the relativity of spacetime.

Now, is it possible to keep the spirit of the Received View while rejecting **Objectivism**?[6] It seems tough. The selling point for **Objectivism** is that it captures a set of cues or methods by which to sort real experts from phonies. As we saw with the COVID pandemic, a lot of phonies offered sham cures – everything from malaria treatments to horse dewormers – so a way to sort the vaccines from the snake-oil would be helpful. And the sorting needs to happen independently of the subgroups of people using Ivermectin and those using the COVID-19 vaccine. This is what the Received View promises, but it can't follow through if justification is relativized to cultures. So, while it's possible to amend the Received View to weaken **Objectivism**, it's not on the table for its endorsers.

We see then that, in the name of a naturalistic methodology, we are compelled to relax **Objectivism**. But what about **Non-natural Meaning**? Where does that fit into the story?

Non-natural Meaning, as we find it in Grice, is about the relationship between signs and what they mean: that signs of expertise mean someone is an expert in the same way that a mechanical *ding!* means that someone needs to get off the bus. This is consistent with both the assertions and denials of **Objectivism** and **Methodological Naturalism**. So, the constraining of **Objectivism** by **Methodological Naturalism** leaves **Non-natural Meaning** untouched.

4. Signs of Expertise

Talk of 'signs' has gone out of fashion in analytic social epistemology, but it's not entirely foreign to modern and contemporary philosophy. Reid developed a theory of signs. So did Locke. And of course Peirce too. Saussure developed a two-place semiotics. Nelson Goodman developed a theory of signs in his *Languages of Art*. Susanne Langer does too in *Philosophy in a New Key*. That's all to say, talk of 'signs' has a history in epistemology and philosophy more broadly, even if one finds it used more in the context of hermeneutics than analytic social epistemology.

Non-Natural Meaning paves the way for thinking about evidence of expertise in terms of signs. And in developing a theory of signs, there's a foundational choice to be made: dyadic or triadic?

4.1 Dyadic vs Triadic Signs

A dyadic view takes signification to be a two-place relation: a sign S signifies object O: both 'cat' and a picture of a cat signify a particular kind of animal (though they do so in different ways). Understanding why certain terms or images signify a particular entity will involve telling a story about the similarity between an image and the object or how a sequence of scribbles or sounds come to refer to the object.

We can spy here Sausurre's distinction between *competence* and *performance*.[7] That a term signifies an object is part of the abstract structure of the language. The sign-object signification relationship exists independently of any particular uses of the sign to signify an object. Individual performance of language-use can fall short of genuine competence.

Compare this with a *triadic* signification relationship: S signifies O to an interpreter I. 'Cat' signifies cats to some range of interpreters. The sign-object signification relationship only gets part of the story. Sign-meaning is always a matter of the triadic relation between sign, object and interpreter.

But what exactly is the difference and why is it important? After all, for both dyadic and triadic views, that a sign signifies an object depends on population-level use of signs as well as long cultural histories. Despite the similarities, the triadic view resists the competence-performance distinction by incorporating the concept of performance into the concept signification: there's no thinking about signification without at least implicitly thinking about performance. The result is that there can't be an abstract structure of language *if abstract means abstracted from the populations that produce signs*. Signification always involves reference to populations.

To illustrate the point, consider the comedian Stephen Colbert. He satirically portrayed a conservative talk show host on his program *The Colbert Report*. Central to the joke was that he appeared really earnest, attempting to mimic famous conservative TV hosts like Bill O'Reilly and Tucker Carlson. LaMarre, Landreville and Beam (2009) found that, perhaps, his mimicking was *too* good. Messages ended up being received differently by different viewers, depending on political ideology. Liberals thought that Colbert was being ironic and didn't mean what he was saying. Conservatives, however, thought that Colbert was putting his points in a comical way but genuinely believed what he said. So which was it? We might appeal to what Colbert believed he was doing, but that doesn't explain how hearers consumed the signs – and it's patterns of interpretation that matter right now. A triadic semiotics holds that what Colbert's utterances signified is fleshed out with populations' interpretations. No sign meaningfully refers to its object outside of the relation with the interpreter. Signs always signify to *someone*.[8]

4.2 Interpreting Signs of Expertise

Applying the triadic semiotic framework is initially straightforward: signs of expertise point to experts for novices. But this shift opens up some useful insights about how novices respond to signs of expertise. Following Fuller's distinction, it opens up conceptual space for an outside-in approach to expert identification.

Assume for the sake of the argument that a triadic view of recognizing expertise is superior to the psychological story underwriting the Received View. If that's right, then a crucial part of any normative account of recognition of expertise will have to take individuals' psychological makeup into account – which means taking cultural influence into account. But that means our normative account is going to vary across populations. There is no one-size-fits-all account for how one attributes expertise, or how it ought to be done. Operations of the mental machinery for assessing evidence of expertise are going to vary across cultures and subcultures.

Further, since a sign isn't meaningful outside of the triadic relationship, signs of expertise for one individual may not be signs of expertise for another. Whether and how a sign of expertise *actually* functions will depend on the consumer of that sign. In other words, individuals I and I* might reasonably disagree about whether some sign of expertise is actually a sign of expertise. The reasonable disagreement here comes from our above-mentioned insights that (a) sign-function indexed to individuals and (b) how individuals read signs depends on cultural influences.[9]

I mentioned that culture works its way into how novices recognize experts through affecting individual cognitive processes. But there's actually a bit more to the story. There are three relationships at work: sign-expert, expert-novice, and novice-sign. Cultural norms and expectations condition each of these relationships.

4.2.1 Sign-Expert Relation and Culture

Which signs point to which experts depends, at least in part, on cultural norms. Signs signify their objects in line with rules. This is just Wittgenstein's insight about the rule-governed character of language. But signs are consumed by organisms like us – cultural organisms. In order for a sign to signify, there must be norms to which the signifying function conforms.

The norms in question are sociocultural norms. Why? Signs are consumed by sociocultural organisms and experts are a sociocultural kind. So, if signs are going to signify experts, then the norms by which they're constrained are sociocultural.

4.2.2 Expert-Novice Relation and Culture

Who counts as an expert and novice depends on cultural norms. 'Expert' and 'novice' aren't natural kinds. Carving up populations into experts and novices depends on the populations themselves. Presumably, when this happens, sorters use sociocultural norms and properties. Crackpots and cranks, for instance, might possess a great deal of knowledge in some niche domain, but they aren't recognized as experts. Someone who has a terminal degree conferred on them by an accredited university is recognized by an expert. Every bit of this process – from conferral to recognition – depends, in large part (if not entirely) on sociocultural norms.

4.2.3 Novice-Sign Relation and Culture

What counts as a sign for consumption depends on cultural norms. The argument here also depends on Wittgenstein's argument about the publicity of norms. In this case, the relevant norms don't specify what a sign signifies, but what counts as a sign for novices in the first place.

In *Philosophical Investigations* §44, Wittgenstein observes that in many language-games, names are used in the absence of their bearers. For instance, we can use 'Wittgenstein' to talk about

Wittgenstein when he's not around or when he's dead. But terms that do not have any recognized function in the language game can't do anything. He asks if one can say 'bububu' and mean, *if it doesn't rain, I shall go for a walk*, and notes that it's only in a language that someone can mean something by something. But what counts as being in a language is determined not just by *how* it's used but whether it *has* any recognized use. But whether a term or expression or whatever has any recognized use is trivially a sociocultural fact. 'bububu' doesn't have any recognized use; 'mug' does; and 'apricity' does too, even if it's a bit obscure.[10] An easy way to verify if words have any recognized use is to look them up in a dictionary or just talk with people.

Since what counts as a sign depends on sociocultural norms, it follows *a fortiori* that what counts as a sign for a novice depends on sociocultural norms.

4.3 Signs and Interactivity

One final point: the more consistently agents respond to signs in particular ways, the more likely they are to respond in *those* ways to *those* signs in *those* conditions. There's no deep philosophical point here, only a psychological observation. The more we act in a particular way, the more likely we are to act in those ways in the future. It's the same point Aristotle makes about virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* book I.

This points us towards a notion of *interactivity* (cf. Kirsh 1997, 2007). Agent-environment interactions drive the nature of the problem-solving. Epistemic agents are cultural agents and always immersed in a cultural context. Interacting within a sociocultural environment is part of how agents pick out experts. And as agents begin picking out experts – as well as being reared in a cultural niche that identifies particular agents as experts – they reinforce patterns of expert identification. In other words, novices both receive and reinforce sociocultural niches in which certain experts are opted for over others. This is a key part of the outside-in story. Sociocultural norms and values exist intersubjectively. And expert identification is affected by socioculturally-mediated mental processes.

Now of course, culture isn't destiny – no more than biology is. So, the mutual reinforcement of novice and sociocultural environment doesn't mean that one will always follow that one path. But it does make deviations harder to pull off the longer one is on that path. If you're skeptical of this point, maybe do some ketamine to open your mind or even clear out your chakras.

5. A Test Case

We've used a triadic approach to semiotics to think about how novices identify experts. It's not a matter of using a fixed set of criteria to determine whether someone is an expert. Rather, we're focusing on the cultural significance of signs of expertise or authority and how they're consumed by novices. The test case we'll focus on is the January 2021 riot at the US Capitol. Why this? Despite the falsity of their beliefs, these rioters put their money where their collective mouths were. Several police officers died, many political officials fled out of fear for their safety and hundreds were eventually arrested. Say what you will about them, their actions reflected their commitment to the Big Lie of Trump's failure.

So what led up to this? We'll have to take the dime-store tour since the scenic route, while interesting and relevant, would be too much of a detour. A decent starting place is in the mid-1990s with the rise of Newt Gingrich in American politics. As Speaker of the House, he was a polarizing force: calling for the impeachment of then-president Bill Clinton, acting as a key player in forcing a shutdown of the federal government and overseeing the passage of bills that both reduced benefits for the poor and put money in the hands of the wealthy. Gingrich's polarizing influence resonated into the late-2000s with the emergence of Tea Party Republicans: conservatives who wanted to cut federal spending and oversight. Importantly, they pushed back against the 'Establishment': Republicans perceived to be happy with the status quo. They supported leaders who were thought of as being outside the mainstream, like Alaska governor Sarah Palin and long-time libertarian Ron Paul. Being the 'outsider' became a winning strategy in American conservative politics.

Now shifting from American politics to American culture more broadly, there is one important theme to consider: individualism. It is *far* too large to consider in depth. But there are a few core ideas that we can summarize.

There are two varieties of individualism in contemporary American culture (Bellah et al. 1985). The first is *utilitarian* individualism, in which citizens are free agents who are able to do as they please in order to advance their own self-interest. This is the kind of individualism behind getting a new job or moving across the country: they do whatever they need to (or can) in order to do what's best for themselves. The second is *expressive* individualism – individuals are permitted to express their unique, inner selves in whatever ways they wish. This is the sort of individualism enshrined in the first amendment of the Constitution of the US. Americans have robust freedoms of speech and this reflects the premium placed on expressive individualism.[11]

The permissiveness of American culture has an immediate impact on the authorities to which Americans will appeal. Whom one takes as an expert is a function of one's unique inner identity. That's to say, part of what marks an American's identity in a subculture are the folks they take to be authoritative. Why? Choice is central to many Americans' sense of well-being (Snibbe and Markus 2005). A manifestation of this is in the tendency to do one's own research (Ballantyne, Celniker and Dunning 2022). In addition, the authorities to which we appeal help express our identities. Putting those together, we have the cultural conditions for bucking the 'mainstream media' and 'Washington insiders' as a way of establishing an identity and being able to do so without severe social sanctions.

So, when Trump lost the election in 2020, his outsider status amplified his criticisms of the election methods and results. 'They' (whoever that might be) didn't want him to win, so they conspired for his defeat. Conservative politicians ran with this, and so did so many conservative pundits. More and more people were repeating the Big Lie: Trump had been cheated out of his win and that American democracy was soon to be lost. For a segment of the population, their information sources were asserting that Trump had actually won.

Now let's jump to January 6. As thousands of people collected near the Capitol, Trump took the stage to greet them. Here are some snippets of his speech:

> The media is the biggest problem we have as far as I'm concerned, single biggest problem . . .
>
> All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they're doing. And stolen by the fake news media. That's what they've done and what they're doing. We will never give up, we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved . . . .
>
> I've been in two elections. I won them both and the second one, I won much bigger than the first. OK. Almost 75 million people voted for our campaign, the most of any incumbent president by far in the history of our country, 12 million more people than four years ago.
>
> We're gathered together in the heart of our nation's capital for one very, very basic and simple reason: to save our democracy . . . .
>
> For years, Democrats have gotten away with election fraud . . .
>
> Our media is not free. It's not fair. It suppresses thought. It suppresses speech, and it's become the enemy of the people. It's become the enemy of the people. It's the biggest problem we have in this country.[12]

So, against the backdrop of a polarized political culture – and a culture in which rebelling against traditional and recognized sources of authority are valued – we have a supposed expert 'telling it as it is'. And the 'truth' he's sharing is one in which shadowy forces brought him down.

We have two different sorts of questions. First, we have descriptive questions: what signs did rioters appeal to and how did each interpret them? What kinds of embodied and cultural influences compelled those people at that time to have read the sign in that way? Second, we have normative questions: how should those rioters at that time interpreted the signs? Were they epistemically blameworthy? These are difficult questions, and there are no obvious answers to them. But an outside-in approach shows that the problem is a lot more challenging than would appear at inside-out approaches. Crucially, taking on a triadic semiotics highlights two important facets of recognizing experts.

First, how signs signify their referents will vary by culture and subculture. What one group might recognize as a sign of authority and expertise (e.g. an advanced degree from a prestigious university) another might recognize as part of 'the Establishment'. And it's not clear that it's possible to settle which is the better interpretation of the sign without appealing to still further cultural and subcultural considerations.[13]

Second, which signs are salient and relevant for novices will likewise vary with culture and subculture. Divergence can happen in two ways. First, it might be that what one novice takes as a sign of expertise, another novice might take as a reason to mistrust a putative expert. A medical degree from Harvard might be taken as a sign of expertise by an elementary school teacher but as a cause for suspicion by a naturopath. In this case, the same sign points towards two different conclusions depending on the interpreter. Second, it might be that what one novice takes as a sign of expertise isn't recognized as a sign at all by another novice. In this case, the sign of expertise doesn't just point in a different direction; it doesn't point at all. The sign is irrelevant for identifying an expert.

So what now? There are a couple of alternatives. One possibility is that expert identification is relative to subculture. This has the immediate benefit of resolving any kind of tension between practices and norms of expert identification. The equally immediate disadvantage is that it would seem to license the worst of our epistemic impulses: follow the leader whose views most correctly align with a subculture to which we belong.

But here is another option. Begin conceptualizing how signs ought to signify to novices in terms of life projects and goals.[14] People often have belongingness as a need, nearly foundational to any other kind of project. Often, our epistemic aims and practices are tangled up with these social and moral goals. So insofar as signs of expertise are understood not just as acting as evidence but also as a marker of social identity, then signs can't be evaluated in epistemic terms alone. It might turn out that there are conflicting needs: responding to signs in such a way that one is able to maintain one's social membership *and also* responding to signs in a way that enables appeals to a wide array of experts. These conflicts are settled, in part, by appeal to various needs one might have and how those needs evolve over time. Social and epistemic needs might come into conflict in some cases, but might not in others. Or maybe social needs will give way to epistemic needs (or vice versa). In any event, judgment of how an agent ought to interpret signs of expertise will be grounded in the relative importance of a set of projects at a given time. And while true beliefs about the world are often important to achieving one's projects, they aren't always needed – especially if you're a member of an epistemic community propping up the false beliefs.

6. Conclusion

I've suggested here that adopting a triadic take on signs of expertise complicates a neat picture of how to pick out authorities. But the neat picture – the Received View – neglects agents' sociocultural embeddedness and makes the conceptual issues seem simpler than they actually are. I suggest that there is still much more conceptual and empirical work to figure out why agents pick out the experts that they do and recommendations for picking them out in such a way that it enables more people to pursue their own projects. Again, following Fuller (2002, xv), we have a social epistemology of expert identification attempting to characterize the problem in ways that can be corrected as opposed to ways that can be merely accepted.

Notes

1. Examples of untrustworthy experts include sham epistemic authorities (Lassiter 2019) and epistemic trespassers (Ballantyne 2019).
2. What makes an expert an expert isn't necessarily the same as how novices identify experts. For instance, an excellent track-record could make A an expert in topic T, but there's nothing about track-records in Anderson's to-do list.
3. These aren't entailed by inside-out social epistemology, but they do fit naturally with the approach. Here is a brief sketch of how. **Objectivism about Justification** prohibits facts about justification from being grounded in community needs and interests, which (defeasibly) suggests that the justificatory facts are grounded in individuals. **Non-natural Meaning** is typically coupled with a story about discerning that meaning, which is usually conceptualized as an individual process. Finally, the sciences appealed to trend towards the individualist end of the spectrum, e.g. cognitive and social psychology. Again, none of these is entailed by an inside-out epistemology, but one can find these claims manifested in the work of Goldman and Anderson, as well as Martini (2014).
4. There are many ways to refine this position. I'm sticking with Boghossian's formulation since it seems to capture what is common to other iterations of the idea. See Carter and McKenna (2021) for an overview
5. Another option is to seriously overhaul **Methodological Naturalism** and keep **Objectivism about Justification** by restricting the appealed-to sciences.
6. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.
7. Chomsky puts it this way. Saussure's distinction was between *langue* and *parole*.
8. An anonymous reviewer notes that Peirce distinguishes between emotional, energetic (i.e. agentic), and logical interpretants. The same agent could feel pulled emotionally in one direction, moved to action in a different direction, and yet endorse a belief that looks in yet a third direction. I hope to use these in future work to develop even finer analyses. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.
9. An anonymous reviewer asks whether a PhD in linguistics from MIT, a track-record of publications, and a tenured position at Harvard would signify expertise in linguistics. This intuition has a lot of pull, but once we start thinking about crowd-sourcing how signs signify across populations, it's not obvious that this case does anything more than reflect the prejudices of folks with at least a four-year college degree.
10. *Apricity* (noun, obsolete): the warmth of the sun in winter.
11. This isn't an unlimited tolerance and it varies with subcultures within the US. Even so, the tolerance is much greater relative to literally every other culture (Gelfand 2018; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010).
12. The text of the speech is available at https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial
13. It might also be that forward-looking considerations can help settle matters, e.g. what kinds of social goods are brought about by the belief. These are important too, but how those social goods are understood as goods is likewise (at least partially) mediated by signs. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
14. There is a lot of relevant work here, including developments in pragmatic encroachment as well as feminist epistemology.

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