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Watching People Watching People: Culture, Prestige, and Epistemic Authority

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ABSTRACT

Novices sometimes misidentify authorities and end up endorsing false beliefs as a result. In this paper, I suggest that this phenomenon is at least sometimes the result of culturally evolved mechanisms functioning in faulty epistemic contexts. I identify three background conditions which, when satisfied, enable expert-identifying mechanisms to function properly. When any one of them fails, that increases the likelihood of identifying a non-authority as authoritative. Consequently, novices can end up deferring to merely apparent authorities without having failed in any epistemic obligations.

1. Introduction

Whom are we to trust? A fraught issue in the best of times, the matter has only become more pressing with the ubiquity of misinformation, 'alternative facts', and fake news. Consider the 2020 US election, surely among the most contentious in the nation's history. It concluded with the losing incumbent propagating the ignoble lie that his loss was the result of subterfuge. A Monmouth University poll reports that 77% of people who voted for Trump believe him (Murray 2020)[1] — remarkable because no evidence corroborates the claim.

While we might shake our heads at these poor souls, mass delusion about falsehoods isn't uncommon: 11% of Americans think that vaccines are more dangerous than the diseases they prevent (Reinhart 2020), and 39% of Americans believe that genetically modified foods are worse for us than non-modified food (Pew Research Center 2016). Of course, vaccinations have lower incidences of mortality than the diseases they prevent (cf. Miller et al. 2015) and GMO foods, by and large, are as safe as non-GMO foods (Kramkowska et al. 2013). Sometimes lost in the worry over population-level delusion is a truism about people's behaviors: their beliefs typically reflect the available evidence. If they see it's raining, they'll bring an umbrella (provided they want to stay dry). If the gas gauge is near 'empty' they'll believe they're almost out of gas. If a bill says 'past due', they'll believe they need to tend to it immediately. Many people who can carry on their daily business with no problems also hold false beliefs about the Earth's shape or who won the 2020 presidential election.

One obvious difference between grabbing an umbrella and believing that Trump lost the election is that the latter depends on expert testimony, and not all putative experts are equally trustworthy. In the days after the 2020 presidential election, influential Republicans and many conservative political pundits pursued a number of fictions: that workers tallying votes were throwing out or defacing ballots; that the Biden campaign had shady connections with the company manufacturing voting

machines; that votes for Biden were being mysteriously 'found' (Tenove and McKay 2021). Such authorities are *sham epistemic authorities*: they have or appear to have some kind of credentialing or other evidence suggesting that they are authoritative, but they lack the practical and propositional knowledge to perform as an authority (cf. Lassiter 2019). One kind of sham authority is the epistemic trespasser (Ballantyne 2019). Two-time Nobel prize-winner Linus Pauling, for example, advocated megadoses of vitamin C as a way to cure all manner of ailments including cancer. Pauling is an authority within his domain, but he was an epistemic trespasser – a sham authority – in medical matters.[2]

In the case of the 2020 election, Rudy Giuliani was a sham authority. As reported in Kiely and Farley (2021), he claimed on his program *Uncovering the Truth with Rudy Giuliani & Dr. Maria Ryan* that more absentee ballots in Pennsylvania came in during the election than were sent out before the election. On another program, *Chat with the Mayor*, he claimed that there were underage voters in Georgia. Again, on *Chat with the Mayor*, as well as Steve Bannon's podcast *War Room*, Giuliani claimed that there were hundreds of thousands of votes by foreigners living in Arizona, and that counting only the legal votes would have resulted in a Trump victory in the state. The Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court cites these and other cases in its suspension of Giuliani's law license.[3] In these instances, Giuliani is an epistemic sham: someone who signals expertise but lacks the relevant knowledge that an expert ought to have. As the personal lawyer for Donald Trump, he has credentials that suggest expertise, but lacked the relevant propositional knowledge through some epistemic failing on his own part. In the Pennsylvania case, for instance, he claimed that 1.8 million absentee ballots were sent out before the election and 2.6 million were counted; in reality, 3.08 million were sent out and 2.5 million were counted (Kiely and Farley 2021) When asked about this during his disciplinary proceedings, Giuliani conceded that he made those statements and also that they were false; however, he claimed that he had reason to believe them to be true at the time he made the statements. When asked for his evidence about their truth, he said that some (unnamed) member of his team got the information from the Pennsylvania board of elections website. But no copy of the webpage exists with the information he describes. The lawyer Giuliani ought to have known that public statements about election fraud needed to be verified.[4]

Consider again those believing that the 2020 election was rife with fraud. *Given* that they trusted shams, their beliefs are reasonable. The crucial question: were these folks acting in an epistemically respectable way when they mistook shams for genuine authorities? Were they exercising any epistemic vices or failing to follow through on epistemic obligations when they misidentified sham authorities?[5]

This is a version of the Recognition Problem (Watson 2020a, 2020b; Brennan 2020): how ought novices identify experts? Goldman (2001) suggests the following as areas of evidence for deciding: arguments supporting their own views and critiquing their rivals, agreement from other experts, appraisal by 'meta-experts', evidence of interests and biases, and experts' track-records.[6] Goldman and others offer helpful recommendations for which experts to trust, but their responses are of limited use. They do not help us answer the question of why learners trust sham authorities or whether it's reasonable to do so. If we end up with a crowd of epistemic ne'er-do-wells – have we done something blameworthy? We poor mortals need signs on the path to epistemic sainthood; but, we also need to know how people deviate from the way.

I'll argue that when people trust sham authorities, they exercise culturally-evolved mechanisms for identifying prestigious individuals in a faulty epistemic context. In a sense, trusting the wrong authority is a lot like perception in a suboptimal environment: the faculty might work just fine but the epistemic environment leads believers astray. We'll get to this conclusion by way of cultural psychology's concept of prestige bias: a cognitive bias which causes disproportionate copying of prestigious individuals' behaviors.[7]

One quick note about terminology: 'prestige' and 'model' are terms employed in cultural psychology: learners preferentially copy prestigious models. Philosophers use 'expert' and 'authority', sometimes interchangeably and sometimes not. I'll use 'prestigious individual', 'expert', and

'authority' as rough synonyms without regard to subtle distinctions. Similarly, cultural psychologists prefer 'learner' and philosophers 'novice', and I'll use them interchangeably.

2. Prestige Bias

Every culture has prestigious individuals and identifying them is an important cultural adaptation. Consider for a moment the weight of identifying someone who can make tools for catching seals or prepare cassava to avoid gradual cyanide poisoning.[8] The consequences of choosing the wrong authority can be dire. In these contexts, how did people evolve cultural strategies for identifying prestigious individuals?

Prestige, as cultural psychologists operationalize it, is using influence or persuasion to gain deference from others. People earn prestige when they display competence in a socially-valued domain and grow in prestige by sharing expertise or know-how (Cheng et al. 2013). A baker, for instance, demonstrates competence by producing excellent baked goods and grows in prestige by sharing this knowledge with others. Same goes for a programmer, teacher, or carpenter.

Now an unidentifiable expert is about as useful as an instruction manual in a foreign language. Cultural psychologists posit *prestige bias* as the mechanism for spotting and copying experts.[9] This cognitive bias causes learners to preferentially imitate prestigious individuals' behaviors. The idea, Henrich and Gil-White (2001) argue, is that learners use a range of cues to identify authorities and then imitate them.

Cultural psychologists distinguish between first-order and second-order cues. First-order cues are properties (either monadic or relational) of individuals that are supposed to be connected with prestige. Examples include wealth, age, higher-education credentials, and generosity. There a cultural evolutionary story to be told in each case which connects the cue with being prestigious. Age, for instance, is a cue for prestige because older individuals have more experience and are better guides for a variety of endeavors, all other things being equal (Henrich and Gil-White 2001)

Second-order cues are relational properties. They are cues about to whom one's fellow learners attend. Novices watch whom other novices are watching. They leverage something like the wisdom of the crowds to discern who the more prestigious individuals are. For example, if I'm trying to choose a pediatrician for my kids, I'll ask my fellow parents who they use. Or again, if a younger member of a tribe wants to learn to hunt, they'll try to link up with a mentor who already has a number of mentees. In both cases, novices looking for an authority use a heuristic along the lines of: trust those whom many of my peers trust.

But how do novices pick their peers?[10] This is a complex issue, requiring detailed discussions from developmental, social, and cultural psychology. The short answer is that it depends on upbringing, socialization, and cultural values. I'll introduce one relevant notion from cultural psychology, given that we're already working in the area. One variable that cultural psychologists are interested in is *relational mobility*: the feeling of freedom to leave relationships and enter new ones. It's a socio-ecological variable that changes with the environment. Americans and Canadians tend to rank high in relational mobility. They often feel free to end old relationships and begin new ones; relationships are fluid. East Asians and West Africans, by contrast, rank low in relational mobility. They tend to think of relationships as long-term and duty-bound. Low-relational mobility cultures (e.g. Japan) tend to tolerate self-other differences much more than high-relational mobility cultures. As a result, there is a greater opportunity cost in low-relational mobility cultures to dissolve ties and create new ones: since everyone is tolerant of differences between themselves and friends, there is less incentive to seek out new relationships and fewer people are looking to cultivate new friendships. In high-relational mobility cultures (e.g. the United States), greater self-other similarity is desired. Consequently, people are more open to dissolving ties to find others that are more like themselves. The opportunity cost for severing and creating ties is low. What this means is that individuals in *high-relational mobility* cultures are more likely to have peers who are more like themselves. In *low-*

relational mobility cultures, individuals are more likely to have peers who are less like themselves. Peer choice, then, depends in part on the sort of culture into which one is born (Schug, Yuki, and Maddox 2010).

It's also worth noting that differences in relational mobility vary within cultures too. For example, high socioeconomic status individuals exhibit higher relational mobility than low socioeconomic status individuals. And urban dwellers are more relationally mobile than members of rural communities (Yamagishi et al. 2012; Snibbe and Markus 2005). So we would expect, on average, poorer folks in rural communities to have their neighbors, schoolmates, co-workers, and so on as their peers. Wealthier urbanites, on average, are more likely to pick up new relationships and drop older ones compared to their poorer, rural counterparts. The lesson? Peer selection depends on micro- and macro-cultural norms, in addition to many other individual and social variables.

When identifying prestigious individuals, learners use both first-order and second-order cues. Each has its assets and liabilities. First-order cues have the advantage of being epistemically direct. Novices have access to cues that indicate prestige, so there are fewer intermediaries in the cognitive processes. Relying on first-order cues affords learners a greater degree of epistemic independence when picking out prestigious individuals, but this epistemic independence comes at a cost. First, some cues are easy to fake. If I'm tracking prestigious individuals based on wealth, then my target needn't *actually* be wealthy as long as they have sufficiently many *trappings* of wealth. Second, some cues are unreliable in a shifting cultural landscape. It may be that, in some contexts, age is a marker of prestige. But in a cultural landscape where familiarity with novel technologies are more socially valued, age can fail to track prestige.

The primary virtue of second-order cues is that they are difficult to fake. It's a waste of resources for learners to attend to mediocre models, and without followers to direct the spotlight, we'd expect such folks to fade from sight. Despite the general reliability of second-order cues, there are two chief liabilities. The first is a weakness endemic to relying on the wisdom of crowds: judgments about prestige are only as good as those of the crowd to which one defers. Suppose a sham authority ends up attracting a handful of learners. Novices, looking for an expert, might end up misidentifying the sham authority as prestigious because the sham is looked up to by other novices. A larger crowd of novices begets more followers. The problem, of course, is that the initial novices picked out a sham authority, and the initial mistake propagates through crowds of newcomers. The second liability is closely related to this point. As a sham authority gathers more followers, their status becomes more entrenched. This is parallel to the phenomenon of people being famous because they're famous: sham authorities garner more learners because there are already so many who defer to them and the growing network of learners keeps the sham in an elevated epistemic position.

What's the takeaway? Agents use both first-order and second-order cues when identifying prestigious individuals. And each can be exploited in a way as to elevate putative epistemic authorities to prestigious positions. Sartre warned us, 'no signs are vouchsafed in this world', (Sartre [1946] 1975, 356) and nowhere is this more true than in discerning whom to trust.

Despite the shortcomings, we depend on cues for picking out epistemic authorities. We have no choice. We are *prestige-marking* when we engage in this kind of activity, using first- and second-order cues to identify a putative authority. Prestige-marking is a proper part of prestige bias. Prestige *bias* involves disproportionate copying of behaviors of those individuals who are identified as prestigious. But prestige-*marking* is identifying those individuals for copying in virtue of the relevant cues, which will be the focus from here on.

3. Prestige-Marking and Its Background Conditions

As people use first-order and second-order cues for identifying prestigious individuals, they engage in first-order and second-order prestige marking. *First-order prestige-marking* is identifying putative authorities using first-order cues. *Second-order prestige-marking* is identifying putative authorities

using second-order cues. All exercises of prestige-marking happen in *some* context, to which we turn.

Consider an analogy with perception. A naïve functionalist account of perception suggests that a perceptual belief is justified if it is produced by reliable mechanisms operating in a friendly environment. A perceptual belief produced in a suboptimal environment by reliable mechanisms lacks warrant because of the faulty environment.

Similarly, our prestige-marking mechanisms might work properly in the right sort of environment and end up picking out the wrong sort of authority because of an epistemically unfriendly context. But there is an important difference between perception and identifying genuine authorities. In the case of perceptual belief, the immediate perceptual conditions matter a lot. Perceivers have a harder time distinguishing among shades of brown in twilight than in daylight. In the case of prestige-marking, it's the broader cultural environment that matters most. Better lighting won't help learners sort genuine authorities from shams. What's needed is a kind of clarity about who counts as prestigious and what it means to be prestigious.

Here's my proposal: 'clarity' in this context is agreement (more or less) by the relevant community members on the cultural conditions for succeeding in a socially-valued domain.[11] The more transparent these conditions are – the more widely they're accepted by the relevant communities – the greater the likelihood of identifying a genuine authority.

Failures of transparency come in two varieties. First, there might be clear conceptions of each of the criteria but disagreement within the community about these conceptions. There is subcommunity agreement, but no community-wide agreement. Second, it might be that the entire community is unclear about the criteria. There is no widespread agreement about the criteria because no one has a clear sense of what the criteria are or should be. Both of these will be relevant in the upcoming discussions.

Now onwards to the conditions. The first is **success criteria**: In order to prestige-mark, there must be greater or lesser agreement about what success looks like in a particular domain. In some domains, like hunting, the criteria for success are obvious. Good hunters return with a large haul; poor hunters don't. But in other cases, there is limited agreement within the community about what constitutes a successful performance or being successful. Consider academic philosophy, for example. Some might count success in terms of quantity of publications and grants; others in terms of teaching excellence; and still others in terms of 'depth' of one's work (whatever that means). For now, notice that the lack of consensus on what constitutes being successful in academic philosophy makes it much more difficult to identify prestigious individuals. *Given* some characterization of success, whom to credit as prestigious becomes clearer. But without this characterization, it is much more difficult for novices to successfully identify prestigious individuals.

The second is **property identification**. This criterion states that the agential properties responsible for success are more or less identifiable. For example, what makes Inuit seal hunters successful are their observational and spearing abilities. Car mechanics are successful in virtue of their skills for diagnosing and repairing problems. When the relevant properties are less readily identifiable, learners begin copying lots of properties of the successful agent. This is an evolutionarily useful strategy: if someone seems successful but it's not clear what's responsible for it, then copy all the traits that might be relevant. For instance, it's reported that many of Wittgenstein's students began to mimic his tone and gestures (von Wright 1955). But even when learners copy swaths of properties instead of one, there's still some culturally agreed-upon properties that are potentially relevant and some that are definitely not relevant. When Wittgenstein's students began imitating his style and mannerisms, they didn't also imitate his attitude towards his sisters. Implicit then is some kind of cultural story about which properties are relevant and which aren't.

The third condition is **causal connection**: There exists some causal story for how the identified properties cause success and that story is communicable to learners. Imagine for a moment a case in which members of a culture could point to a prestigious individual and point to the properties in virtue of which the individual is successful. Such a practice couldn't exist without some kind of

explanation for why *those* particular properties are the secret to success. There would be no reason for copying some particular set of practices as opposed to any other. *Some* folk psychological theory should explain why some properties rather than others are imitated. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any reason why novices copy some behaviors and traits as opposed to any others.[12] Consider by analogy that when novices are learning how to make a bow with which to hunt, they know that the color of the bow doesn't matter. It's not among the causal properties responsible for the efficacy of the bow (Jiménez and Mesoudi 2019). Rather, observers pick up that it's the strength of the wood and string that are responsible for the bow's power. Cultures have a folk physics that explains how those properties are responsible for the bow's efficacy. In the same way, we might expect an implicit folk psychological theory for why novices copy some behaviors and traits as opposed to others.

There's a lingering worry: why *these* criteria as opposed to others? As a motivating thought experiment, imagine for a moment a community in which there is disagreement on what counts as a cue for picking out experts: not on which cues have the highest success rates for identifying prestigious individuals but what counts as a legitimate cue in the first place. Alice thinks P_1 is successful in virtue of hair color for reasons R_1; Bernard thinks P_2 is successful in virtue of shoe size for reasons R_2; Carol thinks P_3 is successful in virtue of their sleep patterns for reasons R_3, and so on. Now imagine that this community has a pressing need to identify the most reliable cues for identifying authorities in some domain. How would our hypothetical community do it? One good way would be to identify their preferred cues and tell a story for how their cues are effective in picking out genuine authorities. Alice says that hair color is a sign of blessedness by the gods; Bernard says shoe size is indicative of wisdom; Carol says that well-rested persons are best equipped for making excellent decisions. Our community members just *couldn't* have a meaningful debate about who is and isn't prestigious because there would be no agreement on criteria for prestige! Alice and Bernard would disagree about whether hair color or shoe size is more important and why, nevermind actually *identifying* an authority.

But now imagine members of our hypothetical community convincing other members. Clusters begin to emerge in which people agree on the conditions. Within those clusters, there might be vigorous debate about which individuals best exemplify the agreed-upon criteria, but inter-group dialogue is unlikely. We're not exactly talking about forms of life, but we're not too far off. Inter-group dialogue about the most reliable cues for identifying authorities is possible when there is agreement about what success looks like and what is responsible for it.

4. Trusting Sham Authorities

We distinguished previously between first-order and second-order prestige-marking. For the remainder of this paper, focus is on second-order prestige-marking because it is more reliable for identifying prestigious individuals. Even in the best circumstances, people doing their best can put their trust in the wrong authority.

The upcoming cases follow a pattern. By hypothesis, novices are second-order prestige-marking, so the sham authority has some set of followers. Additionally, there is failure in one of the background conditions. Highlighting the opacity of the background conditions shows how second-order prestige-marking can misfire. In an epistemic context in which there's disagreement about who counts as prestigious or the properties in virtue of which they're prestigious, learners might do their level best and still get it wrong.

4.1 Failure of Success Criteria

Consider again the rise of Donald Trump in American politics. He campaigned in 2016 on being a businessman and a political outsider. His political virtue was that he had no experience in politics. He and pundits drew stark contrasts between himself and his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Depending

on how one is counting, Clinton was in the political limelight as early as 1982 as the First Lady of Arkansas (i.e. the spouse of the governor) and in 2001 became a New York senator. No matter how you count up the years, it was clear that she had more political experience. The competition brought to the fore different ideas of what makes for a successful president: is it an insider with a wealth of political experience and connections? Or is it an outsider who ignores rules and traditions but has plenty of business experience? These are two; surely there are others.

First, why think Trump is a sham authority? On one interpretation of what it takes to be a successful president – an outsider with experience in the business world – Trump displayed cues of authoritativeness. But he failed to have practical or propositional knowledge of being a successful president.

Now consider a novice in this context, someone who is paying attention to national politics for the first time. The novice, exercising second-order prestige-marking capacities, identifies each of the candidates as prestigious. Importantly, each candidate satisfies different criteria for success, so appealing to the more successful candidate is fruitless. Each appears successful given the subcommunally agreed-upon criteria. Supposing she votes for the first American president who would be impeached twice, is our novice failing in her epistemic duties? It's not clear that she does. In appealing to her fellow voters, she's split between the candidates, and one cause for the fault line is a cultural division on what success looks like in this context. Relying on second-order cues returns both candidates as prestigious with a story for how each satisfies some conception of success. Both appear equally capable for our novice since both satisfy different criteria for success. We might fault her for not carefully considering which conception of success she endorsed, but that's a separate question from one of whether she acted epistemically viciously in voting for the worse candidate.[13]

4.2 *Failure of Property Identification*

Ponzi schemers exemplify a central feature of shams: someone signaling they know their stuff when they really don't. Consider one such case: Jan Lewan.[14] A Polish immigrant to America, Lewan was considered on some accounts to be the Elvis Presley of the polka circuit. In addition to his musical career, he operated a gift shop in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, where he sold trinkets he picked up after touring Poland with his band. He sold shares in his store to investors, promising returns between 12% and 20%. It was a textbook Ponzi scheme. None of his clients – some of whom, tragically, were retirees – knew how Lewan was making these kinds of returns. They believed (wrongly) that they were getting impressive returns while Lewan insisted that the values of their portfolios were rising. Lewan, like other con artists, is a sham authority. He (falsely) signals success and competence. But Lewan didn't actually possess the relevant knowledge for being a successful investor.

The question at hand is: did these investors act epistemically viciously or fail in their epistemic obligations? To answer that, imagine a would-be investor, Brown, who has to choose between Lewan and another fund manager, Smith. Both, we suppose, have good track records, with Lewan likely appearing to have greater success. Further imagine Brown asking both Smith and Lewan how they make their choices. Since Brown is by hypothesis a novice, the explanations are mostly lost on him. Does Brown act viciously by investing with Lewan? Not obviously so. With no understanding of the skills that make each of Smith and Lewan an authority, and second-order cues marking both as an authority, Brown reasonably but unfortunately invests with the crook Lewan. Brown is duped by a conman.

Given that (a) Brown is unable to discern what makes Lewan and Smith each successful and (b) each has a number of investors, as long as Brown is able to offer any relevant set of reasons to invest with Lewan, Brown avoids shirking his epistemic obligations and yet still defers to the sham authority. Generally, second-order prestige-marking in a context in which **property identification** is not satisfied can yield multiple putatively prestigious individuals, provided those individuals each have others who defer to them.

Could Brown be faulted for failing to follow through on epistemic obligations to dig deeper into Lewan? Not obviously. Brown, like many ordinary folks, trusts others with investment decisions. Those of us fortunate to have retirement plans through work trust our employers to have picked out a reputable investment firm; that firm, in turn, is trusted by our employers to have hired knowledgeable investors. In the case of Lewan, Brown would have found out about the small-time, local fund manager Lewan through his social network, giving him more reason to trust Lewan: people Brown knows and trusts invest with Lewan, so without any contrary evidence it seems safe for Brown to trust Lewan as well.

4.3 Failure in Causal Connection

Finally, consider a case in which there's no clear story to be told about how putative authorities' properties are responsible for their success. Consider a case like Jan Lewan but with bigger stakes: Bernie Madoff. He ran the biggest Ponzi scheme the world had seen, robbing his investors out of millions of dollars. He was found out in the financial collapse of 2008 when his investors wanted to pull their money out of his investment firm.

Madoff appeared successful to his investors. He consistently made good returns on investments. And investors had good reason to believe he was the real deal. One investor reported that Madoff always sent a check within a few days should anyone request money from their funds (Berenson and Henriques 2008). The property in virtue of which Madoff was successful was purportedly using an investing strategy that involved buying stocks from high-performing companies. These purchases would come with hedges against possible losses (but also possible gains). Madoff had an investing scheme that seemed plausible to investors in the know.

How is Madoff a sham authority? Like Lewan and other Ponzi schemers, he signaled success and competence, but his case is a bit more subtle. Madoff was intimately familiar with the finance and investing world; what propositional or practical knowledge was he lacking? He was missing, I submit, more detailed causal knowledge of bringing about enormous, steady returns on investments. The knowledge he was signaling didn't match the knowledge he could rightly claim to have.

Madoff's investing scheme didn't seem to match the returns he was getting. Some investors and investigators were concerned about the possibility of fraud – particularly given the steady returns – but many suspected nothing. Madoff was successful by community standards and used a plausible-sounding scheme. What was missing was how *that* method could generate *those* returns. That is to say, there was no transparency in the causal relationship between the investment strategy and the profits.

In such an epistemic context – when it's unclear *how* the strategy is doing what it's doing – it is reasonable for novices to put their trust in a sham authority provided that many others had as well. Why? Initial investors trusted Madoff because he had been working in the field for decades and was a member of industry organizations. He was a known quantity. Novices trusted in the judgments of others, some of whom had hundreds of millions of dollars at stake. Those novices, even if they themselves didn't understand how Madoff's strategy worked, trusted that others did. Trusting others this way is common enough to be epistemically boring: I don't know much about air conditioning repair, but I'll trust someone whom others trust, even if I don't understand how this person's skills generated the desired outcomes. In the same way, despite not understanding his methods, an investor might come to trust Madoff because others trust him.

In summary, we have cases in which a novice depends on second-order cues to identify a putative expert. But because of opacity in **causal connection**, **property identification**, and **success criteria**, prestige-marking misses the mark. Specific cases have been offered, but in general what is it about failures of transparency that enable trust in sham authorities? Here's one suggestion. In cases of opacity, there's an information vacuum. Prestige is a social and cultural phenomenon, so when there's no shared cultural narrative – or an insufficiently specified one – some tale that can be spun which ends up elevating a sham. Consider, again, the rise of Donald Trump in American politics: his

ascent was a product of his being an outsider and a loud-mouthed businessman. Without a widely-shared understanding of what characterizes a successful president, there is space to create a new understanding, one which turns a lack of political experience into a virtue. So in the presence of an informational vacuum around prestige, sham authorities (or their enablers) supply their own account to foster first- and second-order prestige-marking.

5. Epistemic Autonomy

I've argued that at least some instances of following a sham authority is the result of second-order prestige-marking in bad epistemic environments. As a result, it's at least sometimes reasonable that people end up listening to the testimony of a sham authority: given their capacities and their evidence, *that* sham authority is an acceptable one to trust.

There's something to be said, however, about the role of epistemic autonomy in this story (cf. Carter 2020). Or more to the point, about the conspicuous absence of epistemic autonomy. While we don't make judgments in a vacuum, we're also, to some extent, autonomous. Context might inform my judgments, but I bear epistemic responsibility for them all the same. I might (falsely) think that air travel is more dangerous than driving because of voluntarily watched news reports sometimes discussing plane crashes, but I'm still responsible for harboring the false belief. So, the concern continues, the account described above fails to do justice to this insight about epistemic autonomy: we hold people epistemically responsible for latching on to sham authorities because they ought to have exercised their autonomy more prudently.[15]

The intuition in the worry is that people heeding shams have acted wrongly and bear responsibility for their epistemic wrongdoing. This intuition seems right in a lot of ways: at the end of the day, we – individually and collectively – have to live with the results of our choices. If enough people believe that Biden fraudulently won the 2020 presidential election, that's a bad thing for American democracy: peoples' false beliefs about epistemic authorities have individual and collective ramifications.

But how to respond to this intuition? One suggestion: follow a broadly virtue-theoretic path. Consider some of Aristotle's discussions of responsibility (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1110a-1115a): the sea captain who throws his cargo overboard in a storm; the drunk who is ignorant of situational details (cf. Kenny 1979; Cooper 2013). The captain commanded that the cargo be jettisoned and is therefore responsible. The drunk is responsible because they put themselves into a state that made them liable to ignore relevant details. Now in the case of the captain, the situation required that the cargo be chucked lest something worse happen. Anyone with a head on their shoulders would do the same. While destroying cargo is bad, the captain's action is excusable and perhaps even praiseworthy. The well-known lesson from Aristotle is that describing actions as morally praiseworthy or blameworthy is context-dependent, often turning on what leads up to the action. For the captain, the storm forced a decision between the lesser of two evils so that chucking the cargo overboard is not condemned but rather pardoned. For the drunk, the environment didn't force any such decision.

Moving back to epistemic issues: how are we to think about those people who invested with Madoff or Lewan? Or who persist in believing that Biden won the election through fraud? Have they failed in their epistemic obligations or acted in epistemically blameworthy ways? Are they epistemically deficient? On virtue-theoretic approaches, we're prompted to ask further questions: what were the retirees' motives – greed or desperation or nervousness about their future income? Are Trump's supporters informationally isolated from contrary information or are they exposed to information which they dismiss because of its source? Further details are required for assessing whether they are epistemically deficient or not. The glosses in this paper can't settle the matter. What other information would we need? Here is one (tentative) suggestion.[16] Virtues are individually possessed properties that are developed over time in response to feedback. Some of that feedback is from peers and messaging in the wider culture. Agents have first-order evidence that they take to support some proposition *p*, and assessing the justificatory force of evidence is an exercise of intellectual virtues. Additionally, there are sociocultural influences on agents' cultivation and exercise

of intellectual virtues. These influences include norms and expectations for how to reason with evidence (cf. Peng and Nisbett 1999) — that is, they are a part of the higher-order evidence we use to evaluate agents' exercises of intellectual virtues. When agents achieve a degree of fit between (i) exercise of intellectual virtues in the evaluation of evidence and (ii) higher-order expectations related to those virtues, we have at least necessary conditions for settling if agents were epistemically virtuous or vicious.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that mistaking sham authorities for genuine ones is at least sometimes the result of second-order prestige-marking in bad epistemic environments. In some cases, it can be reasonable for people to latch on to sham authorities. Of course, people shouldn't be praised for latching on to shams, any more than someone ought to be praised for following Jonathan Edwards as a moral authority (Bennett 1974). For those who have managed to be reared in epistemically saintly ways, the better reaction is one of sympathy, a sense of there, but for the grace of God, go I.[17]

Notes

1. The data here are open to interpretation. It's possible that responses are motivated by simply reporting their beliefs about the election. But it's also possible that responses are motivated by other commitments: e.g. reporting that the election was fraudulent because they support Trump but not necessarily because they believe the election was actually fraudulent. That's all to say that while 77% of Trump voters *report* believing he lost because of fraud, their *actual* beliefs or *motivations* for reporting their belief as they do might differ. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
2. Being a sham epistemic authority is a relational, external property. Individuals are shams with respect to some set of conditions, including minimally the domain over which one is presumed to be authoritative.
3. Matter of Giuliani, 197 A.D.3d 1, 146 N.Y.S.3d 266, 2021 N.Y. App. Div. LEXIS 4197, 2021 NY Slip Op 04086 (Supreme Court of New York, Appellate Division, First Department. June 24, 2021, Entered).
4. In *Gentile v. State Bar of Nevada*, 501 U.S. 1030 (1991), the court argued that lawyers, because they are perceived by the public as being in a position of knowledge, are a "crucial source of information and opinion". Public expectations of lawyers ground the claim that Giuliani ought to have known that the facts he publicly stated needed verifying.
5. Whether epistemic norms should be characterized in terms of virtues or duties is an aside to the main question. So throughout the argument, when appropriate, I'll talk about both obligations and virtues so no one feels left out and everyone can play.
6. See also Anderson (2011) for a similar list. For criticism, see Matheson (2005); Coady (2006); Scholz (2009); Zagzebski (2012), and Guerrero (2017). For a review of the literature, see Grundmann (forthcoming).
7. The present paper is one attempt to pick up where Stichter (2015) leaves off: how novices credit others with expertise.
8. See Henrich (2018) for cases like these and others. In case you're curious, preparing cassava for consumption is a three-day process. If this process is shortened in any way, it leaves enough cyanide in the root pulp to kill a person. But death doesn't come on quickly if preparations are cut a day short. The cyanide builds up until death comes on weeks or months later. By that time, it would be hard to say exactly what had killed the person.
9. See Chellappoo (2020) for criticism of positing prestige bias as an explanation for identifying prestigious individuals.
10. Many thanks to Gloria Origgi and T.Y. Branch for suggesting discussion of this point.
11. This fits with the cultural evolutionary approach: cultures are solutions to problems and there are different ways to solve similar problems. Cf. Shweder (1991), Heine (2020).
12. It could be that, with Wittgenstein ([1953] 2009), we follow rules blindly. Even so, there's still some rule at work and that's the important thing.
13. An anonymous reviewer asks whether it's really plausible to believe that a novice would regard both Trump and Clinton as equally capable, especially given the racist and sexist baggage of Trump. My answer is: yes, and for the reasons given above. Whether or not the baggage impugns Trump's success as a president depends, in part, on culturally agreed-upon criteria. If the population is split on those criteria and if some of those criteria downplay the significance of this sort of baggage, then it's plausible a novice could see Trump as more qualified and as the superior authority. By analogy, Martin Luther King, Jr. is an important figure in the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. But there's evidence that he was a philanderer and perhaps was even tolerant of

some of his closer associates participating in acts of rape — though it's worth noting that these are from FBI documents that are perhaps less than reliable in this context. In thinking about King as an epistemic authority — perhaps with respect to moral knowledge — one might object if the success criteria include anything about remaining faithful in one's marriage.

14. I recommend the documentaries *Mystery of the Polka King* and *The Man Who Would Be Polka King*.
15. Thanks to meeting-goers at the Social Indicators of Trust conference for articulating this worry. And for an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify it.
16. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing clarification.
17. Thanks to the participants of the Social Indicators of Trust conference, the Philosophy of Experts/Expertise Reading Group on Facebook, Gloria Origgi, T.Y. Branch, Anna Marie Medina, Greta Turnbull, Vinai Norasakkunkit, Richard Kenneth Atkins, and Garland Rossman for discussion and encouragement.

Disclosure statement

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