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Further Reflections on Epistemic Hubris: A Reply to Lanius

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In commenting on my paper “Epistemic Hubris” (2025), David Lanius (2025) makes several interesting observations, all of which point to the need for a deeper exploration and clearer definition of this epistemic disposition. The objective of these observations is manifold: to distinguish hubris from other similar but distinct vices; to avoid confusing it with a totally legitimate, and valuable, epistemic practice—namely, thinking critically; and finally, to more carefully assess the social risks raised by it. In the following, I will attempt to respond to Lanius’s observations. More specifically, I will attempt to explain in greater detail what allows us to distinguish those affected by epistemic hubris from those who are simply better informed than others (despite not being “experts”) and who engage in critical thinking. I will then discuss the virtues that can effectively counter epistemic hubris, commenting on Lanius’s proposal concerning epistemic authenticity. Finally, I will offer some further reflections on the risks raised by epistemic hubris and on the plausibility problem, while acknowledging that an empirical investigation would be necessary in order to assess the actual risk potential of epistemic hubris.

Epistemic Hubris or Critical Thinking?

A person affected by epistemic hubris is someone who believes themselves to be, and behaves as, an expert despite not actually being one. But what does it mean to be an “expert”? In my paper, I did not propose a specific definition of experts or expertise. However, as Lanius notes, it would be useful to clarify who counts as an “official” expert, in order to distinguish them both from individuals who are not officially recognized as experts but can nonetheless participate in and contribute to scientific debate, and occasionally also provide useful advice to laypeople; and from individuals who, in addition to not being officially recognized as experts, also lack the relevant features required to participate in and contribute to such debate. Who, then, are official experts? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for defining a person as an “expert” in a given domain?

Unfortunately, answering this question is far from straightforward. For being identified as an expert, the possession of an academic degree or diploma is by no means a sufficient condition. Merely holding a degree in a subject tells us nothing about the actual training an individual has received or about their real capacities (Goldman 2018, 8). Possession of a degree is not even a necessary condition for being considered an expert. Goldman offers the example of a person who may be highly knowledgeable about opera and legitimately express informed judgments about it, despite lacking any formal education or academic qualification in that field (4). Lanius agrees on this point and cites cases of citizen scientists as further evidence that official academic credentials are not necessary (94).

Several scholars have attempted to identify the conditions that should characterize experts, typically emphasizing the possession of competencies, skills, and correct beliefs within a given domain. This is the approach proposed by Grundmann (2022), according to whom S can be defined as an expert in a domain D at time t if and only if: (i) S is superior to the majority of people in that S possesses both more relevant domain-specific evidence than the

majority about D at t, as well as better domain-specific reasoning skills; and (ii) S forms sufficiently reliable beliefs about D.

Are these conditions *necessary and sufficient* for defining an expert? It is difficult to answer this question with confidence. As Lanius observes, with respect to condition (i), it could be satisfied by many non-experts, including conspiracy theorists, who are often far more informed than average on certain issues. As for condition (ii), it refers to epistemic success, which, however, can characterize both experts and non-experts alike (93).

If it is difficult to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for someone to count as an “expert” in a given domain, we may pursue an alternative route and attempt to define experts on the basis of what they do—namely, their role in society. This may also be the most useful analysis for the purpose of correctly distinguishing between those who are affected by epistemic hubris and those who think critically, inform themselves about relevant issues, and thereby acquire above-average competence, without presenting themselves as experts or attempting to assume that role.

In the wake of Croce’s (2019) analysis, we can distinguish between research-oriented and novice-oriented definitions of experts. The former defines the expert on the basis of the contribution they make to progress within a domain—progress made possible by a deeper overall understanding of that domain and by research-oriented abilities (18–19). The novice-oriented view of expertise, by contrast, focuses on the function of the expert in relation to non-experts: on this view, an expert is someone who, in virtue of possessing certain knowledge, helps laypersons—who lack such knowledge—improve their epistemic condition in a given domain (Grundmann 2022, 2). According to a novice-oriented account, what defines S as an expert in a domain D is “the capacity to help others (especially laypersons) solve a variety of problems in D or execute an assortment of tasks in D which the latter would not be able to solve or execute on their own” (Goldman 2018, 4).

The novice-oriented view has been criticized on the grounds that it introduces a significant degree of subjectivity into a definition that we might instead wish to be objective. However, I suggest that both kinds of experts—research-oriented and novice-oriented—are needed in a well-functioning society. We want to be able to claim, for instance, that it makes sense to consult a physician for therapeutic advice even if that physician has never contributed to advances in medical knowledge; the absence of such contributions does not render them a less reliable expert. At the same time, we also want to be able to share certain competences we have acquired without being renowned professionals, and without being accused of epistemic hubris. Everyday life teaches us that, in some cases, it is sufficient to be comparatively more knowledgeable than others in order to provide them with valuable assistance.

It may therefore be appropriate to further reflect on the domains within which providing such assistance is legitimate and those within which it is not. The medical domain, for example, is particularly delicate, whereas other domains seem less so. Suppose, for instance, that I have acquired a certain degree of familiarity with the preparation of leavened doughs,

such as those used to make pizza or bread. Several friends, recognizing this competence, turn to me for advice on how to prepare a good dough rather than consulting a professional pizzaiolo or baker. They do so because they know that I am comparatively more knowledgeable than others, and that my competence is probably sufficient for their purposes. In this case, my epistemic action—namely, offering them advice—does not appear inappropriate. It would be inappropriate, by contrast, if I were to provide them with a medical diagnosis without being a physician. The culinary domain thus appears to be less epistemically delicate.

Yet, even the domain in which comparative expertise is exercised does not allow us to clearly distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of sharing knowledge. There may well be particularly delicate domains, such as medicine, in which epistemic hubris can cause more serious harm. However, even my offering advice about leavened doughs could, in principle, harm someone: by following my suggestions, a friend of mine might prepare an inedible pizza precisely on the evening when she had invited her supervisors to dinner, who might then—partly as a result of her poor culinary performance—decide that she does not deserve the promotion they had been considering. Perhaps, then, rather than the specific domain, the true discriminating factor concerns the potential harm caused by a non-expert as a result of their advice. But this route is also problematic, since unforeseeable consequences can arise even from apparently innocuous advice in relatively non-delicate domains.

It seems to me that what makes the difference between legitimate and illegitimate exercises of comparative expertise is the attitude adopted by the non-expert, including what they convey to others about their own competences. My mother, for instance, has given me excellent advice on how to deal with common ailments such as colds and flu, despite not being a physician and without her act of sharing relative expertise being in any way problematic. Why? Because, in offering advice, she never claims to know more than—or even as much as—a medical professional. If the function of the advice is clear, and if the limits of the shared knowledge are clear (and explicitly acknowledged), we are not dealing with epistemic hubris.

One could explore further hypotheses concerning the definition of expertise and the social role of experts, given the vast literature on the topic. However, in the context of analyzing epistemic hubris as an epistemic vice, providing a definition of expertise serves primarily to avoid the risk of accusing of epistemic hubris someone who is simply and genuinely “more knowledgeable than others on a given topic,” or someone who merely exercises critical thinking by informing themselves before taking a decision, even in the absence of specific expertise in the relevant domain. And this can be achieved without delving into the complex question of what it means to be an “expert.”

The relevant discriminating factor, in my view, is therefore the following: awareness of one’s own epistemic limits—of what one knows and does not know, of what one can speak about competently and what one cannot. In other words, the discriminant consists in the possession of intellectual humility, which is one of the central virtues lacking in individuals affected by epistemic hubris. The presence of epistemic humility is the hallmark of those

who are able to think critically or offer advice without pretending to possess expertise they do not in fact have. The epistemically humble person does not risk trespassing, taking a step too far, or failing to give due weight to what they do not know.

Humility or Authenticity?

Identifying a virtue capable of counteracting a specific vice is a fruitful way of further characterizing the latter's nature. Although I did not explicitly mention humility as the virtue capable of neutralizing epistemic hubris, Lanius rightly hypothesized that epistemic humility would likely have been my first choice. He then raises the following question: "Is epistemic hubris, then, just a special case of the vice opposed to epistemic humility?"

While epistemic hubris is certainly, as I understand it, a vice opposed to intellectual humility, I do not believe it is the only one. There are, in fact, many distinct vices that stand in opposition to epistemic humility. Thi Nguyen (2019) identifies epistemic humility as the mean between epistemic nihilism and epistemic dogmatism; Roberts and Wood (2007) describe intellectual humility as the absence of vanity, arrogance, conceit, and domination (77); Whitcombe and colleagues characterize it as the virtue that lies between excessive and deficient self-regard; and for Ian Kidd, epistemic humility is "a virtue for the management of confidence" (Kidd 2015, 54). Epistemic hubris is also neutralized by epistemic humility, but it does not constitute a "special case" of the other vices mentioned.

Lanius nevertheless identifies another virtue that might serve as an antidote to epistemic hubris: epistemic authenticity, which is opposed both to epistemic hubris and to epistemic diffidence. I find the notion of epistemic authenticity highly appealing and particularly apt for capturing certain manifestations of epistemic hubris—especially those that are more socially risky and troubling, and those in which epistemic hubris is expressed through the sharing of one's beliefs with others. The exercise of epistemic authenticity does not render epistemic humility superfluous; rather, I see the two as mutually supportive virtues, not as mutually exclusive ones.

There is, however, one aspect of Lanius's analysis with which I do not fully agree. Epistemic hubris, as he rightly observes, is a disposition expressed in an epistemic action—and this action consists in replacing or standing in for experts. Yet, unlike Lanius, I do not think that this action necessarily involves "the intention to create the (unwarranted) expectation in others that one has expertise—independently from one's other mental attitudes" (95). Such an intention would in fact unduly restrict the scope of epistemic hubris, implying that individuals affected by this vice act primarily out of a desire to be recognized by others as experts. For some individuals (perhaps even for the majority), this may well be the case—for instance, in the case of know-it-all celebrities.

For others, however, epistemic hubris may take on a more private character: individuals who live under the illusion that they can replace experts by reading data and drawing conclusions, consulting disparate and often unreliable sources, without necessarily sharing their "discoveries" with others. I think epistemic hubris can be a disposition that satisfies itself even in the absence of others, without an audience, by indulging thoughts such as: "Others

have studied this for fifteen years; it took me only two afternoons of online research to know as much as they do.” Of course, vices often co-occur, and it is therefore common for epistemic hubris to be accompanied by vanity, and thus by the desire to be recognized by others as “experts.”

The Plausibility Problem

In my paper, I discussed—rather briefly—the risks raised by epistemic hubris. I did not dwell on them at length because this line of reflection ventures into the realm of what is possible rather than necessary; accordingly, I limited myself to outlining the kinds of risks that this vice might generate. In particular, I argued that epistemic hubris could produce effects that are even more harmful than those associated with other vices such as conspiracism and hyper-autonomy, due to the apparent plausibility of the beliefs formed by individuals affected by this vice. This plausibility stems both from their ability to employ technical language as a result of having conducted research on the topic, and from the absence of the extreme skepticism toward official sources that characterizes beliefs formed as a result of other vices. As Lanius rightly observes, however, in order to claim that the harm produced by epistemic hubris may *exceed* that produced by hyper-autonomy or conspiracism, I would need empirical evidence—which I do not have, though it would certainly be worthwhile to gather.

It therefore seems more appropriate to claim that the harm produced by epistemic hubris might (and here the use of the conditional is again required) affect a *different* pool of individuals than those who are persuaded by conspiracy theories. Why different? To answer this question, we need to clarify how beliefs resulting from conspiracism—as well as from contrarian thinking or hyper-autonomy—differ from those formed by individuals affected by epistemic hubris. It is therefore useful to reconsider what distinguishes these vices from one another.

Epistemic hubris, as I understand it, is a way of thinking characterized by the conviction that one can easily replace experts and competently pronounce on even complex issues. It may function, to some extent, as a core component of other vices, which add to this disposition their own distinctive attitudes: the conspiracist adds the belief that there is a conspiracy operating against ordinary people; the contrarian thinker adds skepticism toward what they perceive as the mainstream view; and the hyper-autonomous agent adds the desire to act without relying on anyone’s testimony. In other words, conspiracists, contrarian thinkers, and hyper-autonomous agents often act like individuals affected by epistemic hubris, but they do not stop there—they add further, mutually distinct attitudes that shape in specific ways how they form their beliefs.

Epistemic hubris, by contrast, lacks these additional attitudes—attitudes that are also often responsible for giving beliefs their more extreme features, such that only a portion of the population is genuinely inclined to endorse them. Epistemic hubris can therefore be insidious: precisely because it is less prone to extremism, it may generate beliefs that enjoy a greater appearance of plausibility than conspiracist beliefs. It does not reject official views by

default; instead, it may reinterpret them or embellish them with additional details, thereby producing beliefs that are closer to common sense. Moreover, it makes extensive use of others' testimony, thus avoiding the complete self-referentiality vainly pursued by the hyper-autonomous agent. As Lanius rightly notes, this greater plausibility does not imply that beliefs generated by epistemic hubris will spread more widely or more easily. Rather, they are likely to take hold among different individuals—perhaps more moderate ones. Yet this claim, too, would require empirical support: for the time being, it remains speculative.

Conducting empirical studies to test the operation of epistemic vices requires competences beyond those of philosophy alone—competences that I do not possess. In other words, I could not carry out such research on my own. I therefore take this opportunity to issue a call: if scholars with the relevant expertise are reading this and would be interested in experimentally investigating the workings of epistemic hubris, I would be delighted to collaborate with them.

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