

When the experts are uncertain: scientific knowledge and the ethics of democratic judgment

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Abstract

This paper explores the problem of the relation of democratic judgment to expert knowledge, focusing in particular on the case of scientific knowledge and the implications of its forms of uncertainty. It begins by broadly characterizing the problem of knowledge in political theory and in democratic theory in particular, drawing on the history of political thought – and in particular on democratic Athens and its philosophical critics – to do so. The model of popular judgment – and its relation to organized domains of expert knowledge – is elicited from this history as a promising lens for contemporary democratic theory. The paper then turns to the evaluation of the relation of democratic judgment to expert knowledge in a variety of modern disciplines, surveying certain positions in social epistemology and in social psychology. It identifies an excessive limitation to the question of *identifying* experts to whom to defer in the former literature, and an excessive tendency to manipulation in the question of how to correct for known biased heuristics in judgment in the latter (also indeed borrowed by the former). Both of these weaknesses will be exacerbated in the case of significant scientific uncertainty of certain kinds, as attends our current knowledge of the likely course of climatic change. As an alternative, the paper concludes by proposing a focus on enabling the public to engage in *judging* the broad outline of scientific claims, including an assessment of where uncertainties do and do not affect it and of what kinds. While this is a more demanding standard than deference and identification alone, it may also prove more robust.