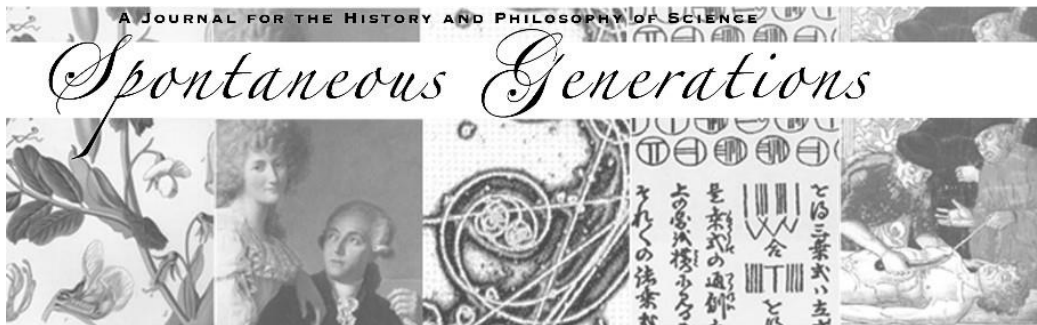




Review of *Expertise: A Philosophical Introduction*, by Jamie Carlin Watson.
Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 248 pp.

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Review of *Expertise: A Philosophical Introduction*, by
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Jamie Carlin Watson's book at once lives up to its title by offering a rigorous yet highly readable overview of the philosophical discussion surrounding expertise, and exceeds expectations by at the same time presenting an original and attractive account of what it is to be an expert. The book should prove interesting and accessible to those approaching the study of expertise from other academic disciplines, while also being suitable for advanced undergraduate or graduate courses in the philosophy of expertise. The theory of expertise that Watson develops and defends in the book's concluding chapter is, moreover, likely to generate sustained discussion among specialists. In this review I will offer a sketch of the book before raising some questions about Watson's own account of expertise.

Watson begins with a helpful preface in which he clearly sets out his agenda, which is to tackle the following two 'big questions' in expertise studies:

1. What is an expert?
2. How does someone become an expert? (xiii)¹

Watson's strategy for approaching these questions is first to consider the most influential extant responses to them, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each. His account then builds directly on the insights gleaned from these existing approaches, while purporting to avoid their various drawbacks.

Before proceeding to this task, which constitutes the heart of the book (chapters 3-7), Watson provides the reader with an erudite and entertaining overview, in Chapter 1, of various ways in which trust in expertise can be *confounded*. This chapter

¹ As Watson is careful to acknowledge, these are not the only 'big questions' in the field. He points to three others:

1. What does it mean to say that an expert has "authority" and how much should we trust authorities?
2. How does anyone recognize an expert, and how do we choose which experts to listen to?
3. How do we decide what to believe or do when experts disagree?

Although these latter questions are not left wholly unaddressed (and the account Watson develops in Chapter 7 will likely have important implications for how we answer them), they are not treated in depth. This is not however a failing of the book, but rather a reasonable limitation in scope.

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mostly serves to motivate the project, while also surveying the work of other researchers, but Watson does make one important conceptual point: contrary to

much recent rhetoric, the distinctively modern epistemic challenges we face (filter bubbles, echo chambers etc.) are not evidence of some blanket *rejection of expertise* but instead reflect specific defects in the process through which people determine *who* is an expert, and so worthy of trust.

In Chapter 2, Watson sets the stage for the remainder of the book by distinguishing between several broad forms that an account of expertise might take (more on these below). Although much of Watson's discussion here and elsewhere is premised on the assumption that what he calls an 'objective general' account of expertise is both attainable and desirable, he does briefly consider the possibility that no such unified theory of expertise is to be had. I will later register some concerns about the prospects for a unified account of expertise, but Watson is surely correct that it would be premature to abandon the search for such an account at this time.

In Chapter 3, Watson sets out the structure, motivation, and core commitments of *truth-based* accounts of expertise. He proceeds to offer a convincing critique of this class of accounts. While he denies that having knowledge of (or reliable access to) *truth* itself has any part to play in delineating the nature of expertise, he argues that there is an objective epistemic criterion of expertise in the vicinity, which he labels *epistemic facility*. Moreover, he suggests that an approach that gives pride of place to this latter idea can capture what is appealing about truth-based accounts while jettisoning their weaknesses.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Watson turns to *performance-based* accounts of expertise. Chapter 4 reconstructs the influential account of Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, before subjecting it to several criticisms. However, Watson again suggests that there is something importantly correct about this approach, and that if it is suitably modified (i.e., in a way that foregrounds the experience of the expert rather than the novice) it can form part of an appealing account of expertise. In Chapter 5, Watson turns to consider the rich body of psychological research on expert performance. Watson focuses in particular on Anders Ericsson's study of the role of so-called 'deliberate practice' in the acquisition of expertise. He moves on to consider some other research which suggests that the idea of deliberate practice, while important, does not itself sufficiently explain the development of expertise.

In Chapter 6, Watson introduces one final category of extant accounts of expertise, *social role accounts*. As was the case with the previous two groups of contender theories, Watson ultimately concludes that a theory of this kind cannot, on its own, meet the conditions for a satisfying general account of expertise. However, he again finds an important grain of truth in these approaches.

In the final chapter, Watson draws together the various insights which he has gleaned from the extant accounts to construct a novel theory of expertise, which he calls the *cognitive systems account*. He first identifies several starting points which any account of expertise should accept. It will be helpful to briefly enumerate these before proceeding to Watson's account.

Watson's first point of (anticipated) agreement is that whether some level of competence in a given domain amounts to expertise is relative to the state of the domain at the time. Importantly, this does not make expertise subjective (since what counts as the 'state of the art' in a given domain at a given time is an objective

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matter) but it does make it relative. Following on from his argument in Chapter 3, Watson thinks some such view is necessary if we are to acknowledge that Isaac

Newton, among others, was an expert in his field, without giving up on the idea that there is some objective criterion of expertise. The second point similarly emphasizes the domain-specific character of expertise, by rejecting the idea that there is any set number or proportion of practitioners (the top 5%, for example) who can count as experts in a domain. Whereas in some domains expert competence may be very rare, in others it may be comparatively common. Watson's third point of departure is that (contrary to truth and performance-based accounts) *both* understanding and performance are integral to expertise, whether the domain in question is philosophy or ballet. Finally, Watson suggests that an account of expertise is a non-starter if it does not recognize the *irreducibly social* character of expertise. An adequate account, that is, cannot ignore the way in which developing expertise in a domain relies on there being existing experts who set the standard, and who can provide those who are not yet expert with feedback.

With these criteria in mind, Watson sets out his own cognitive systems model of expertise. Building on Daniel Kahneman's well-known distinction between System 1 and System 2 cognitive processes, as well as empirical work by Ericsson and James Tetlock, Watson's account highlights two distinct routes to the acquisition of expertise. "In domains that are well-defined, highly structured, and include ample opportunities for immediate feedback—i.e., kind environments—expertise is efficiently acquired by training System 1 cognitive processes (with deliberate practice) so that performance is subconscious and intuitive. Call this...System 1 expertise...In domains that are less well-defined, loosely structured, and in which feedback is largely indirect—wicked environments—expertise can be acquired by training System 2 cognitive processes (with expansive practice) so that performance is reflective and careful. Call this System 2 expertise" (p. 173).

Important for Watson's account is the contrast between deliberate practice, which "intentionally engages System 2 processes to create mental representations and store them in long-term memory...[which] makes them available as fast, intuitive, skilled practice that is characteristic of System 1 expertise" and expansive practice, which "takes our skills and background information along with the products of System 1 processes and slows them down by intentionally engaging System 2 processes to produce the careful, complex judgments characteristic of System 2 expertise" (p. 174-5).

The depiction of the expert in a domain which results is, Watson claims, able to satisfy all the desiderata for an adequate account of expertise enumerated above. According to the cognitive systems approach, an expert is someone who a) has a high degree of competence in a domain at a time that b) is acquired through rigorous training along one of the two cognitive systems, and c) that is confirmed to be high enough by the current state of skills and information in the domain.

While I think the account Watson presents is an appealing one, not least for the way in which it incorporates cutting-edge research in other fields, I do have some concerns about its ability to capture all apparent instances of expertise.

First, as set out by Watson, the cognitive systems account explicitly rules out the possibility that someone could be an expert in a domain without rigorous training (either in the form of deliberate or expansive practice). However, I fear that building

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the *process(es) through which expert competence is acquired* into our account of expertise itself will force us to withhold the title of expert in certain cases where,

intuitively, we ought not to do so. There do seem to be people with a degree of natural aptitude in a domain so pronounced that it is at least tempting to consider them experts even in the absence of rigorous training. We might think for instance of the mathematical savant. Even if it turns out there are no empirically uncontroversial instances of untrained experts in mathematics (or any other field), I very much doubt whether it is part of our intuitive concept of expertise that it *always and necessarily* results from extensive training. Perhaps then Watson should be seen as offering, not an analysis of our ordinary concept, but rather a kind of revisionary definition. If this is the case, the above worry loses its force, but it also becomes more difficult to gauge the success of his project.

A second worry takes off from the role that Watson apparently wants the cognitive systems approach to play, namely that of an objective, general account of expertise. This makes it crucial to any overall evaluation of the account that it prove adequate not only for some or most domains, but for all of them. For this reason, it is striking that the book contains almost no discussion of *moral and aesthetic (or more generally, normative) expertise*. Normative domains would seem to be a good test case for the generality of any account of expertise, since these appear to have some special features. Most remarkably, there is (many think) something distinctly 'fishy' about deferring to the testimony of experts in these domains, where this fishiness which is not present in other domains. This might plausibly be taken to indicate also that there is something unique about *being an expert* in such domains, which any proposed general account of expertise would then have to accommodate. Perhaps Watson would deny this and would moreover confine the issues about the proper uptake of normative testimony to the latter three of the 'big questions' about expertise he identifies. This might justify the omission of these thorny issues from the present work. Yet I cannot avoid feeling somewhat dissatisfied with such a response. I am not saying that Watson's cognitive systems account cannot neatly accommodate normative testimony and explain its *prima facie* puzzling features, but in this book, he gives us no indication of how it might do this. Especially as Watson has himself done extensive work on moral expertise, it seems to me that it would have significantly enhanced the book had he explicitly integrated this other strand of his work into his discussion of the cognitive systems account.

The above, however, remain minor quibbles when set against *Expertise: A Philosophical Introduction's* many virtues. I heartily recommend the book to anyone seeking to familiarize themselves with the state of the philosophical literature on expertise.