# Reply

## The Real Struggle: An Objective Notion of Expertise?

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### 1.

In a paper published in this journal Martin Hinton aims to show that the struggle between Moti Mizrahi and me about whether arguments from expert opinion are weak arguments rests on misunderstandings (Hinton 2015). Let me emphasize that I generally appreciate Hinton's intention to settle the dispute between Mizrahi and myself in this way.[1] Furthermore, I also agree with Hinton's conclusion that *if* Mizrahi is interpreted in the way Hinton does, *then* Mizrahi's "claim becomes far less controversial, but also rather uninteresting" (Hinton 2015, 551)—to refer to the title of my former paper: just spilling out the water wouldn't be worth a paper in *Informal Logic*.[2] Let me therefore focus in this reply on the points where Hinton directly attacks my treatment of Mizrahi and also what Hinton takes to be my account of expertise. I will discuss the following criticism of Hinton: (1) that, at points, my attack on Mizrahi is unfair due to my misunderstanding of his intentions, (2) that the notion of expertise I use is self-contradictory/inconsistent, (3) that the

[1] In fact, Hinton goes further in claiming that the reason for our alleged dispute is that Mizrahi and I lack "precision in argument" (Hinton 2015, 539) and show a "lack of clarity" (Hinton 2015, 540) but I take Hinton's aim to be rather constructive than just bemoaning such alleged deficiencies.

[2] That is the reason why I do not think Hinton's interpretation is right: if Mizrahi really just wanted to state that "arguments from *apparent* expert *predictions* are weak arguments" (Hinton 2015, 551), I see nothing of *philosophical* interest in such a statement beyond the empirical studies that are cited by Mizrahi. Therefore, I cannot imagine that Mizrahi just aims to make such a trivial and uncontroversial statement.

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argument for my view is circular, (4) that one of my examples—the example from soccer—is mistaken. In rebutting this criticism, I aim to clarify the background of my former paper in this journal.

## 2.

In his paper, Hinton notes that Mizrahi himself uses the notion of expert opinion in an imprecise way: "The ambiguity in [Mizrahi's] claims is a direct result of his own inconsistency in what he means by expert opinion." (Hinton 2015, 540). Hinton aims to clarify Mizrahi's notion and in this way wants to provide a charitable interpretation of Mizrahi's argument. According to Hinton, what Mizrahi really is after is not 'expert opinion' where 'opinion' just refers to any statement made by experts in their domain of expertise but 'expert opinion' in the sense of 'expert prediction': "This is what the examples used by Mizrahi bear out: that, although he doesn't state it explicitly, he is only discussing expert predictions." (Hinton 2015, 541). Despite the fact that Hinton blames Mizrahi for not clearly saying that he just has expert predictions in mind, Hinton then goes on to argue that my attack on Mizrahi has been somehow unfair:

> Yet, [Seidel] still often argues with Mizrahi on the basis of a more wide-ranging understanding of expert opinion, and concludes that Mizrahi is wrong to use evidence about predictions as an argument against opinions, even though it has been clearly stated that Mizrahi is only using it as evidence against arguments from predictions. … [B]ut having noted that Mizrahi's use of the term 'opinion' is idiosyncratic, Seidel should not assess his claims based on a more conventional understanding of the term. (Hinton 2015, 541)

I admit, I am not really sure what to make of this. Of course, so I think, I *should* assess Mizrahi's claims exactly against this more conventional understanding of the term 'opinion' if that is the understanding used by the authors Mizrahi explicitly wants to show to be wrong: In case Hinton is right that Mizrahi tacitly understands "expert opinion" in an idiosyncratic way that is different from what those whom he attacks have in mind, it is—contrary to Hinton's claim—required to note that Mizrahi's argument simply does not go through. My argument is that many of Mizrahi's cases just concern expert predictions and that he somehow aims to undermine the claims of those authors he cites on arguments from expert opinion in this way. But if Hinton is

right that Mizrahi uses "expert opinion" idiosyncratically, then his argument against these authors rests on a simple equivocation. To my mind, it is an expression of philosophical rigor to criticize an argument resting upon an equivocation such that I see no reason not to assess Mizrahi's argument for the equivocation that also Hinton seems to have spotted in Mizrahi's text. It is not unfair to claim that an author's argument is a non-sequitur by pointing out that it only goes through if this author changes the meaning of a term in an attack on others.

**3.**

Hinton claims that my conception of expertise is self-contradictory and inconsistent. Here are some quotes to this effect: "Seidel … frequently misses the point and, at times, contradicts himself" (Hinton 2015, 540), "Both authors give some space to discussing their conceptions, but neither does so satisfactorily and both are, to a degree, self-contradictory" (Hinton 2015, 542f.); "Seidel also displays inconsistency over the nature of expertise" (Hinton 2015, 543).

Why does Hinton think that my conception of expertise is self-contradictory or inconsistent? He thinks that I subscribe to the veritistic definition of expertise that I have quoted from Alvin Goldman according to which "experts in a given domain … have more beliefs … in true propositions and/or fewer beliefs in false propositions within that domain than most people do" (Goldman 2001, p. 91). Then, Hinton claims that this conception is inconsistent with my claim that we should not evaluate whether Aristotle was an expert in biology or not in relation to current state of the art in biology: it is, so I maintained, unfair to say that Aristotle was not an expert *because* of the fact that he did not know anything about the structure of DNA. Here is where Hinton seems to have detected an inconsistency:

> This would mean that an expert is someone who knows the learning of his day, even if it is later discovered to have been in error: but what then of true beliefs? If an expert has true beliefs in his field, and Aristotle was wrong on many things, then Aristotle wasn't an expert. Undoubtedly, today's greatest scientists will be found to have been wrong on a great many things too, several thousand years from now, so they are also not experts. This seems absurd, and since Aristotle knew a lot more than most Greeks, we want to call him an expert: the true belief theory of expertise, then is on very shaky ground … . (Hinton 2015, p. 543)

I would like to clarify three things. First of all, in order to claim that *my* conception of expertise is inconsistent, Hinton must assume that I subscribe to Goldman's veritistic conception of expertise. It is miraculous why Hinton thinks so because I explicitly discuss the problems of Goldman's account in my paper. I approvingly discuss Oliver Scholz's criticism of Goldman that proposes to take into account also further epistemic desiderata beyond truth—like, e.g., understanding—and conclude that "since there is no generally accepted account of what it means to be an expert, we should be careful to entertain an argument that draws on assumptions of what it means to be an expert" (Seidel 2014, 198). I do not see how in view of this clear statement not to rely on any sense of what an expert is in my argument Hinton comes to believe that "Seidel wants to understand 'expert' only in one sense […]" (Hinton 2015, 544). In fact, what I do in the passages to which Hinton refers, is the following: I take Goldman's definition as a vantage point in order to illustrate that we should distinguish between the property of *being* an expert and the property of *taken to be* an expert and then use this distinction for pointing out a flaw in Mizrahi's use of empirical evidence[3]—in order to come to this distinction nothing hangs on Goldman's veritistic account that I just considered as an example of an account of an objective notion of expertise. I surely defend such an objective notion of expertise, but in view of my explicit criticism of Goldman's specific account it is quite surprising how Hinton can mistakenly believe that my view and Goldman's veritistic account of expertise are identical.[4]

Second, Hinton's argument does nothing to establish *inconsistency* or *self-contradiction* but simply consists in the claim that the veritistic account of Goldman is absurd or implausible because it would imply that even the best scientists today should not be regarded as experts. Note, that Hinton's conclusion is that the veritistic conception of expertise rests on shaky grounds because it cannot capture the intuition that we should call Aristotle an expert even in case he entertained mostly false beliefs and leads to the absurd conclusion that also today's scientists are not experts. Even if we assumed that Hinton's argument is correct this would not establish inconsistency or self-contradiction at all but at best show the implausibility of Goldman's conception. And it is of major importance to distinguish between the claim

[3] See also Stefan Reining's recent paper in which he agrees with me that Mizrahi's argument is flawed just in this respect (Reining 2016, 11).

[4] The fact that Sebastiano Lommi recently has seen that "Seidel admits that Goldman's definition of authority is questionable" (Lommi 2015, 40) lets me suspect that my intention at that point of my paper was not just implicit.

that a certain conception or position in philosophy is inconsistent or self-contradictory and the claim that it is wrong or implausible. Take the example of the discussion about alethic relativism to see the difference: it is one thing to claim that alethic relativism is inconsistent and/or self-contradictory, but it is a completely other thing to claim that alethic relativism is wrong or implausible because it provides an account of truth that cannot capture all intuitions we have about truth. I do not see, therefore, how Hinton's claim that Goldman's veritistic conception of expertise leads to the assumed absurdity that today's scientists cannot be called experts can sustain his claim that there is any inconsistency or self-contradiction involved.

Third, probably Hinton's claim of inconsistency and self-contradiction should somehow arise due to the putative fact that the following two claims about expertise cannot be coherently incorporated in one, single account of expertise: (a) somebody is an expert only in relation to a group of people; (b) somebody is an expert only if she exceeds a minimum of epistemic desiderata like e.g. truth (see Seidel 2014, 208/9). Hinton seems to suggest that there is an inconsistency because my example of Aristotle is an example where the relational character of expertise expressed in (a) is taken seriously but where the veritistic—or, I would prefer, objective—character of expertise in (b) is not—he claims that "[i]t is clear that experts of Aristotle's era must have made a good many poor predictions based on their imperfect scientific knowledge, which makes them both experts and non-experts on Seidel's reasoning" (Hinton 2015, 549). However, where exactly is the inconsistency between statements (a) and (b) such that I need to call Aristotelian biologists experts and non-experts? As I discuss in connection with the Aristotle-example an adequate account of expertise should fulfill both conditions (a) and (b) (Seidel 2014, p. 208/9). An obvious, *consistent* possibility of such an account would be simply to claim that in order to be an expert somebody has to exceed a certain threshold of epistemic merits of beliefs (e.g. truth) and that this threshold is itself relative to the amount of true beliefs entertained in a relevant reference group.[5] To claim that Aristotle is an expert in biology would mean, then, that he entertains enough true beliefs, where 'enough' has to be understood in relation to the state of the art of biology during his time and not relative to the state of the art of the field today. Perhaps this account has problems or is implau-

[5] Note, that this is just an example for a consistent account of expertise that fulfills both conditions (a) and (b) in order to undermine Hinton's inconsistency-claim. I emphasize that I do not want to suggest that this is "my account". More of that below.

sible or even wrong, but it is surely not inconsistent. And, in general, it is surely not inconsistent to demand of an account of expertise that it accommodates both the objective and the relational intuitions we entertain about the concept of expertise.

What is decisive here is that Hinton seems to believe that "my account" of expertise just consists in entertaining the statements (a) and (b). Let me emphasize that I am far from claiming that (a) and (b) provide a satisfactory account of expertise but that both are *necessary conditions* for such an account.[6] Perhaps an analogy is of help here: my relation between (a) and (b) and an adequate account of expertise is roughly the same as the relation between Convention T and the definition of truth in Tarski's work. It would be a mistake to take Convention T as Tarski's definition—it is his intuitively plausible condition of material adequacy that any definition of truth should fulfill. Just the same with my statements (a) and (b): these are thought to be intuitively plausible conditions of material adequacy that an account of expertise should fulfill. And the problem of an adequate account of expertise is just that these intuitive conditions cannot easily be integrated into a convincing account of expertise: it is not easy to do duty to the relativity of experts and, at the same time, avoid that the smartest kid in class should be called an expert. Somehow funnily, that is just what Hinton at the end of his paper also claims once it comes to present the general outline of his own account: "[A clear and firm characterization of who is an expert] will need to account for the relativity of expertise and provide a full account of why an expert is not simply the most knowledgeable person in the room …" (Hinton 2015, 552). So there is no disagreement here between Hinton and me, if one does not read 'an account' into my short remarks about necessary conditions for an intuitively satisfactory account of expertise. (Just for the record, I explicitly bemoan that "a satisfactory theory of expertise that accounts for both intuitions underlying these conditions is still a desideratum" (Seidel 2014, 209 Fn. 28) in a footnote directly after stating (a) and (b) that Hinton does not notice. Therefore, it is miraculous why Hinton thinks that I myself present such an account in the paper he discusses.)

[6] I explicitly introduce (a) and (b) in just this way in my former paper: "An exact specification and explication of the property of being an expert would be far beyond the scope of this paper, but I think that the following two conditions are necessary conditions for an account of expertise …" (Seidel 2014, 208).

**4.**

Apart from inconsistency Hinton also thinks that "Seidel's view on experts leads to circularity" (Hinton 2015, p. 543). First of all, let me note that I am a bit puzzled about this claim: What does it mean that my view *leads* to circularity? Does that imply that my argument for it *is* circular or does this mean that it *isn't* circular but some consequences of it are? I take it that Hinton thinks that my argument is circular itself[7]—but I have to admit that I am not sure. What is Hinton's argument for the reproach that my argument is circular/leads to circularity? Here it is: "[Seidel] is essentially saying that an expert simply is someone who gets things right, most of the time anyway, so 'unreliable expert' is an oxymoron. The argument becomes: it is reasonable to believe the statements of an expert because an expert is someone whose statements it is reasonable to believe." (Hinton 2015, 543).

In reply, let me first emphasize again that it is completely mysterious why Hinton thinks to describe *my* view in this passage—I am not essentially saying that an expert is simply someone who get things right. Again, I refer to my explicit criticism of a simple veritistic account which forestalls any simple identification of such an account and my views on expertise.

Second, I take it that Hinton wants to claim that the alleged circularity involved is *vicious* since he speaks of my "confusion" (Hinton 2015, 543); I take it that he thinks that the putative circularity in fact should be avoided. However, I do not see that there is any vicious circularity in the claim that it is reasonable to believe the statements of an expert because an expert is someone whose statements it is reasonable to believe. As I argue, *given* the definition of expertise along veritistic terms that I discuss in my paper it is an analytic falsity to claim that an expert is only slightly more accurate as chance. I do not see why pointing to the consequences of a definition is a viciously circular procedure as Hinton suggests. Take the following analogy: "married bachelor" is surely an oxymoron. Now, assume someone claims to have conducted empirical studies with bachelors that suggest that some bachelors—contrary to first appearance—are married. A critique now says the following in response: "No, your 'bachelors' cannot be married because a bachelor is someone who is unmarried—your 'bachelors' are not really bachelors!" Where, so I ask, is the vicious circularity in the procedure of the critique of the empirical bachelor-study? *If* "married

[7] This supposition might be sustained by Hinton later referring to my characterization of who is an expert as "a circular one" (Hinton 2015, 552).

bachelor" is an oxymoron, *then* purported 'bachelors' that are married are not really bachelors. And, analogously, *if* "unreliable expert" is an oxymoron, *then* purported 'experts' that are unreliable are not really experts. What is at issue here is not vicious circularity in any way but whether it is really true that "unreliable expert" is an oxymoron. Thus, I do not understand Hinton's charge of (vicious) circularity: there is no more circularity in my argument than in any argument pointing to the consequences of a definition.

Third, Hinton in his argument about the purported circularity of "my" view does not seem to notice that in my paper I am far from accepting the argument from the idea that it is an analytic falsity to claim that experts are only slightly more accurate than chance. The reason is not circularity but immunity to empirical studies (see Seidel 2014, p. 198f.). I set up an analogy to philosophy of science where a philosopher of science immunizes her own account of scientificity by always claiming that purported counter-examples taken from the history of science should not be taken seriously since—according to her criterion of scientificity—these examples do not qualify as science. That procedure, so I claim, is a question-begging form of doing philosophy of science because of its immunization to empirical refutation. The same is true with the argument from the alleged definitional truth that experts are reliable sources and the analogy is important: like the notion of science the notion of an expert is not a philosophical term of art but denotes a real world phenomenon and therefore any philosophical account of expertise should not be immune to potential criticism that aims to show that the philosophical conception does not adequately capture the real world phenomenon. In view of the fact that I, therefore, explicitly reject the argument that Hinton believes to be circular/lead to circularity, I do not understand why he thinks that I subscribe to it.

To sum up my argument in (2) and (3): Neither do I see any inconsistency/self-contradiction nor any vicious circularity in my account. Hinton mistakenly and despite my explicit criticism of it thinks that I adopt a simple veritistic account of expertise. Furthermore, even if this account is wrong or unconvincing, Hinton has not shown why it is self-contradictory or circular: the fact that Hinton himself sees "the root of [my] confusion" (Hinton 2015, p. 543) in my not taking into account how the term 'expert' is allegedly used in everyday language—"[e]xperts are those paid for their expertise, those who offer apparently expert opinion, those who *ought* to be experts given their previous experience" (Hinton 2015, p. 544)—does not point to an inconsistency or circularity in my account but to the fact that Hinton

disagrees with me about whether 'expert' has to be treated as an objective notion. Claiming that an objective account of expertise is not convincing because it does not take into account the purported everyday use of the term 'expert' is, however, something quite different from being able to show that 'my account' includes inconsistency/self-contradiction or circularity.

Let me comment at this point shortly on Hinton's own use of the terms 'expert' and 'expert opinion'. In view of the fact that Hinton aims to show that Mizrahi's and my quarrel about arguments from expert opinion rests on "certain ambiguities and confusion over the terms of the debate" (Hinton 2015, 540), it is surprising to see how unclear the terms of the debate are used by Hinton himself. Here is just one example:

> A definition that is of great practical use is offered by Kutrovatz. He suggests that experts are 'people who have, or who are attributed by others, an outstanding knowledge and understanding of a certain subject or field'…. This is clearly the meaning that Mizrahi is employing, although he doesn't make it explicit. For Seidel the attribution of knowledge by others is irrelevant, for Mizrahi it is crucial and this is where their fundamental disagreement stems from. (Hinton 2015, 545).

This is puzzling—what exactly is "the meaning" Mizrahi is employing and that can be extracted from Kutrovatz' definition? Taking into account that Hinton thinks that for me the attribution of knowledge by others is irrelevant, I suspect that it is this meaning that Hinton has in mind for Mizrahi. But note that this is only part of the notion of expertise invoked by Kutrovatz in the quote: an expert is someone who *has* or *is attributed* knowledge and understanding. Since one of the key points in my former paper is that there is a difference between people *having* knowledge/true belief/understanding and people *taken to have* knowledge/true belief/understanding and since Hinton claims that Mizrahi and I are confused because we use different notions of expertise—Mizrahi, a notion where *attribution* is decisive, and I, a notion where *actual knowledge/true belief* is decisive—it comes as a surprise that Hinton approvingly quotes a definition in which the confusion that he thinks Mizrahi and I are victims of is simply repeated. In fact, he simply seems to overlook the two aspects in Kutrovatz's definition and to treat it just as a definition along the lines of *attribution of* knowledge.[8]

[8] This fact is even more puzzling once we take into account that Hinton also claims that "[in] everyday use 'expert' refers both to someone who actually knows the answers and someone who is taken to know them" (Hinton 2015,

**5.**

A further quarrel by Hinton is with my example from soccer: I claimed that "it is highly plausible that soccer experts are much more often right in predicting the outcome of soccer matches than laypersons relying on coin flips" (Seidel 2014, p. 206) and that it is not necessary to conduct empirical studies to confirm or test this claim. Hinton bemoans that my claim is a claim about the wrong reference group: "we should not compare the soccer experts' predictions with the toss of a coin … rather we should compare the professional expert with the part-time fan" (Hinton 2015, p. 547). He then shows, convincingly, that there are empirical data that suggest that a BBC soccer expert has been as successful in predicting the outcomes of soccer matches as celebrities with whom he competed (Hinton 2015, p. 547f.). Hinton takes this result as a refutation of my claims:

> it shows how Seidel didn't feel it necessary to conduct a study on soccer experts because he instinctively trusted in their expertise, not because they do, in fact, regularly predict the correct results. … Seidel has, therefore, unwittingly gone some way to proving the falsity of his own claim by choosing as an example a very unreliable field of prediction (Hinton 2015, p. 548).

This conclusion, however, is a *non-sequitur*. In a first step, Hinton reinterprets my claim that soccer experts are much more often right than laypersons relying on coin flips and insists that *I should have claimed* that soccer experts are much more often right than part-time fans. And, in a second step, Hinton attacks this new claim (that I have never made) by citing convincing empirical studies. Finally, he takes this as a refutation of *my own* claim. Well, that is a cheap victory. What goes wrong in Hinton's argument? He simply forgets that my original claim with the allegedly wrong reference group just is the negation of Mizrahi's own exaggerated claims. It is surprising that Hinton finally blames me for confusing the issue because he sees that "the mention of coin-flips confuses the issue, although, again, this is to a large extent Mizrahi's fault." (Hinton 2015, p. 547). Remember, it is Mizrahi who makes the sweeping claim that "experts were only slightly more accurate than chance" (Mizrahi 2013, p. 64) and that the experts are no better than dart-throwing chimpanzees—his claim is not that experts are no better than part-time fans. Therefore, mentioning coin-flips is just the right

544). This seems to comply just with Kutrovatz's definition of experts as somebody *having* or *being attributed* knowledge.

issue given Mizrahi's dazzling claims. But, to repeat, attacking me for my treatment of a claim that *I should have* made, like Hinton does, is weird.

Do I need to conduct an empirical study in order to sustain the claim I have really made and in this way show that soccer experts are better in predicting soccer-outcomes than laypersons flipping coins? And, if not, is it my "instinctive trust" in soccer experts that leads me to believe that soccer-experts are more accurate than chance as Hinton claims? To both questions the answer is "no". The reason for thinking that soccer-experts are better than mere chance is—as I also discuss (Seidel 2014, 206f.)—the difference in background information that is relevant for predictions even in areas where prediction is tricky. An expert has knowledge and understanding of the area at issue—to use part of Kutrovatz's definition that Hinton misreads—whereas a dart-throwing chimpanzee has no knowledge and understanding of the area at issue. Is it really necessary to conduct an empirical study to show that information and knowledge in an area are relevant for being better in predictions in that area than the complete absence of knowledge? This weekend I visit my 3-year-old nephew and although, at the moment, he fancies trains and he is much more interested in *playing* soccer than in estimating outcomes I promise to bring him to throw coins on the outcomes of the weekend's soccer matches and then will compare the results with my predictions afterwards. Why do you expect *now* that I will fare better and why are you surprised in case he fares better? Of course, it is the information about the strength of the teams that is relevant here and that my nephew lacks. We do not need to discuss Bayesianism in order to see that background knowledge is of high relevance in estimating probabilities of outcomes of soccer matches. It is exactly such background knowledge that the coin-flipping layman is lacking and that the expert possesses. Thus, it is surely not my "instinctively trusting experts" but my convictions about the role of background knowledge in estimating probabilities that leads me to say that we do not need to conduct empirical studies in order to see that those with no background knowledge at all will fare worse than those with background knowledge.[9]

In sum, although I appreciate Hinton's intention to downplay the differences between Mizrahi and me, I am not convinced by the critical parts of Hinton's paper: He mistakenly

[9] In effect, Hinton seems to agree with me on my original comparison between experts and laypersons relying on coin flips: "of course, [the expert] will be more successful simply by knowing the current league positions of the teams" (Hinton 2015, 547).

thinks that I subscribe to Goldman's account of expertise and unconvincingly reproaches that "my account" is self-contradictory/inconsistent and circular. To my mind, Hinton's real problem is with the objectivity of the notion of expertise that I rely on in my argument—it would be interesting to focus on this issue and discuss the plausibility of such a notion. That issue is the real struggle.

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