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Expert agreement as second-order evidence: Consider the GAPS

When experts agree on a view, this can often be regarded as second-order evidence for that view. However, it has not been sufficiently recognized that instances of expert agreement are extremely diverse and various types of agreement differ regarding how strong reasons they give to believe the proposition on which the agreement exists. It might be futile to attempt defining a universally applicable set of conditions for deciding when expert agreement is reliable second-order evidence. Instead, I propose that it is helpful to construct a framework that can guide the use of expert agreement as a source of second-order evidence in different contexts. Such a framework seeks to ensure that its users are at least asking all the right questions and paying attention to the issues that may be relevant.

I separate four dimensions along which instances of purported consensus may differ from each other: 1) The nature of the proposition agreed upon, 2) The boundaries of the group having the purported consensus, 3) Strength of the agreement, and 4) The socio-epistemic processes behind the agreement. The first step for deciding whether an instance of expert agreement is reliable second-order evidence is characterizing the agreement along these dimensions. In other words, one should examine the "GAPS": the dimensions of Group, Agreement, Proposition and Socio-epistemic processes.

The second step consists in asking how an agreement should look like in terms of these four dimensions if it is to constitute good second-order evidence. Instead of searching for a single set of criteria, I analyse how the dimensions of expert agreement are interrelated. For example, how the boundaries of the agreeing group should look like depends on the kind of proposition agreed upon. To illustrate and motivate the analysis, I use examples related to economics and the use of economists as a source of expert judgment.