

EPISTEMIC COERCION AND THE EPISTEMIC LEVIATHAN

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Stephen Turner identifies forms of epistemic coercion. My reply focuses on the source of experts' power to epistemically coerce others. I identify one such source, which I call "The Epistemic Leviathan." The Epistemic Leviathan is formed in a time of crisis, when some members of society grant experts the exclusive right to determine truths believing that only the experts can resolve the crisis. I suggest that we have seen this happen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: expertise, expert testimony, lab leak theory, media, conspiracy theory

ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКОЕ ПРИНУЖДЕНИЕ И ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКИЙ ЛЕВИАФАН

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Стивен Тернер выделяет формы эпистемического принуждения. Мой ответ посвящен источнику способности экспертов эпистемически принуждать других. Я выделяю один из таких источников, который я называю «эпистемическим Левиафаном». Эпистемический Левиафан формируется во времена кризиса, когда некоторые члены общества предоставляют экспертам исключительное право устанавливать истины, полагая, что только эксперты могут разрешить кризис. Я предполагаю, что мы уже видели, как это происходило во время пандемии COVID-19.

Ключевые слова: экспертиза, экспертные свидетельства, теория утечки информации из лаборатории, СМИ, теория заговора

Stephen Turner's paper contains an excellent taxonomy of forms of epistemic coercion, and respective forms of resistance. Turner identifies three forms of coercion that are typically *internal* to science: epistemic gate-keeping, e.g., deciding what gets published, intimidation, e.g., threatening to harm a researcher's career, and indoctrination; namely, initiation into a paradigm. He then identifies three forms of coercion that are *not*



necessarily internal to science: information deprivation, normalization and stigmatization, and legitimating and delegitimizing.

This distinction raises an interesting question. In our society, scientists enjoy the autonomy to run their own business. Within science, scientists have the exclusive power – which is often unnoticed and taken for granted – to epistemically coerce each other. But from where do they get the power to epistemically coerce outside science? Where does their power to enforce their views on others come from when they are operating in greater society? In my comment, I’d like to focus on this question, and suggest one way (among many) by which experts get this power. I call it the *Epistemic Leviathan*.

Turner’s paper does not contain many examples. The elephant in the room, it seems, is COVID-19. During the pandemic, we have all seen the experts change their minds frequently, while each time presenting their current view as the unshakable truth, and labeling anyone who disagreed as an enemy of science, truth, and rationality. Recall how in the early days of the pandemic, we were told that masks didn’t work (but we should leave them to the medical teams that need them anyway); then we were told they absolutely worked; and then we were told that they still absolutely worked, but we should only wear the N95 masks. A lesser-known example: early in the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) claimed that it was an established fact that COVID-19 was not airborne, only to quietly retract that claim two years after [Lewis, 2022].¹

As Turner notes, within the scientific community experts have power. They can gatekeep the flow of information, affect the careers of other experts, and indoctrinate young researchers entering the field. In general society, left to their own devices, experts usually do not have enough power to epistemically coerce others. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, experts did have such power. Where did it come from?

A familiar answer that comes from Foucault and those who follow in his footsteps [e.g., Rose, 1998] is that this power comes from the modern state. At the risk of oversimplification, according to this narrative, biomedical experts have formed symbiotic relationships with the state. Biomedical experts, primarily psychiatrists and psychologists, have developed medical and statistical categories that allow the state to govern the masses. The experts distinguished the statistically-normal, normative, tax-paying, and law-abiding citizens from the statistically and sexually deviant, criminally insane, and disruptive citizens, who pose a threat to public order. The experts have given state the justification to take the freedoms of its citizens, backing it with the authority and objectivity of science. In return, the state has granted the experts the power to determine truths and enforce them. According to Foucault, however, neither

¹ For social epistemologists’ insightful analyses of additional examples, see Intemann and de Melo-Martin [2023], Birch [Birch, 2021], and Winsberg et al. [Winsberg, Chris, 2020].



the state nor the experts ultimately pull the strings, as they are both caught up in the logic of the knowledge they coproduce.

Taking a cue from Foucault and Schmidt, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has applied this explanation to COVID-19. Agamben is generally associated with the claim that modern politics has turned into biopolitics: the modern state seeks to make the *state of exception* its normal modus operandi with the aim of revoking its citizens' freedoms and controlling their biological body in the name of public safety and security. In a series of "I-told-you-so" blogposts written during the COVID-19 pandemic, Agamben [Agamben, 2021] argued that the state used COVID-19, which was "a normal flu, not too dissimilar to the ones that recur every year" [Ibid., p. 13] as an excuse to finally declare a lasting state of exception and create

exactly that which those who govern us have tried to actualise many times before: the closure of universities and schools once and for all, with lessons conducted only online; the cessation of gatherings and conversations on politics or culture; and the exchange of messages only digitally, so that wherever possible machines can replace any contact – any contagion – among human beings [Ibid., p. 16].

Even Agamben's sympathetic followers, however, acknowledge that this explanation leaves much to be desired. Has the state really always secretly aspired to lock us down in our homes? If COVID-19 was just an ordinary flu, why hadn't previous flus led to a worldwide crisis? And even assuming that there was nothing special about COVID-19 and Italy just reached its breaking point, why did it trigger a global cascade?² Why did the media, which usually has its own agendas, play along with the state? Why haven't lockdowns become the new normality as Agamben predicted? How come we have returned, more or less, to a pre-pandemic routine? When the state finally gained the power it had always sought, why did it give it up?

More than wrong, Agamben's explanation is misleadingly partial, and overlooks important factors. The state is a heterogeneous body with many actors who have different and conflicting agendas. Experts are also not a homogenous group. As Turner convincingly argues, every form of epistemic coercion generates its respective form of resistance. No single actor has the power to trigger such comprehensive state action, and epistemically coerce all other actors.

Winning a war requires making alliances. When power is distributed among actors, for example, when it is not the case that Stalin [Stalin, 1950] can settle a controversy in linguistics over the pages of *Pravda*,

² In the 1970s, American epidemiologists were convinced that the Spanish flu was making a comeback, and convinced the US government to start a national vaccination campaign. Other countries, however, were not persuaded and waited to see how events would unfold in the US. In retrospect, this campaign was uncalled for [Kolata, 1999].



epistemic coercion requires some empirical facts that stick. Without such facts, it's hard to recruit allies, let alone coerce other actors. In the case of COVID-19, the fear that the death toll would be huge, and hospitals would collapse was sufficiently backed by evidence to trigger a cascading reaction. That doesn't always happen.

The different distribution of epistemic and political power in different countries explains why they experienced different dynamics despite similar initial conditions. For example, in line with previous ideological divides involving science, such as those concerning abortion or teaching evolution in schools, the progressive left in the United States sided with science and tended to support lockdowns and school closures, while the conservative right tended to oppose them. By comparison, in Israel, the lockdowns and school closures were regarded by the liberal left as attempts by Prime Minister Netanyahu to secure his power and establish a de facto authoritarian regime after failing to win democratic elections. Thus, in Israel, the liberal progressive public was the one who protested to return the children to school.

Acknowledging such complexity is the first step in explaining how epistemic coercion is possible, but it still does not explain the peculiar case of the suppression of the lab-leak theory by major mass-media and social-media outlets. In the rest of the paper, I focus on this example.

From the start of the pandemic, mainstream outlets, especially left-leaning, including *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, dismissed as a “conspiracy theory” the claim that COVID-19 leaked from a virology research lab in Wuhan. They failed to distinguish between the claim that COVID-19 accidentally leaked from a lab, the claim that it was purposefully developed as a biological weapon, and the claim that it was purposefully released [Flam, 2021]. In September 2020, respected fact-checking site *PolitiFact* conclusively ruled out the lab-leak theory, claiming that the “genetic structure of the novel coronavirus rules out laboratory manipulation. Public health authorities have repeatedly said the coronavirus was not derived from a lab.” It also stated that the “consensus of the scientific community and international public health organizations is that the coronavirus emerged from bats and later jumped to humans” [Yan, 2020]. *PolitiFact* retracted this post in May 2021 because the claim about the impossibility of genetic manipulation was unsupported. But in fact, there had been no consensus either. A *Nature* report from 2021 describes the question of the origin of COVID-19 as open [Maxmen & Mallapaty, 2021]. It is still open in 2024 [Dewan, 2024].

How did the official version about the natural origin of COVID-19 emerge and how did it acquire foothold? Dewan [Ibid.] nicely summarized its origins:

In February 2020, White House medical adviser Anthony Fauci was alerted during a conference call with a group of scientists that COVID-19



might have originated from a lab. Shortly after, a paper titled “The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2” was authored by conference participants and published in *Nature Medicine* [Andersen et al., 2020]. It doubted that a lab leak was “plausible.” That same month, the medical journal *The Lancet* published a statement signed by 27 scientists rejecting the theory [Calisher et al., 2020], which expressed “solidarity with all scientists and health professionals in China.” It added: “We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.”

In March 2020, the WHO published a report that conclusively stated that all evidence suggested that COVID-19 had natural origins and did not leak from a lab [WHO, 2020]. Whether this conclusion was based on solid empirical evidence, sloppy research, or part of a cover-up, the WHO report certainly seemed like an attempt to settle the issue once and for all; namely, a clear attempt at epistemic coercion. Of course, as Turner argues, coercion generates a reaction: the more you try to epistemically coerce, the more it seems to some people that you have something to hide.

While it can be argued that promoting COVID-19-denial, vaccination hesitancy, mask skepticism, or lockdown resistance might cause people to endanger their own or others’ health by not getting vaccinated, not wearing masks, or not keeping social distance, a person’s view about the origin of COVID-19 does not have such an effect. It should not matter what I think about the origins of COVID-19 for whether I wear masks. The usual justification for preventing the spread of misinformation does not apply in this case. This makes its suppression by the media more puzzling.

So why did the mainstream media and social media platforms participate in the coercion? The answer is complex and requires empirical research that exceeds the scope of this paper. But I would like to propose a hypothesis: it was the *Epistemic Leviathan*. Thomas Hobbes [Hobbes, 1651] famously contends that humans, driven by self-interest and a constant pursuit of power, exist in a “state of nature” marked by conflict and insecurity. To escape this condition, individuals surrender their natural rights to a sovereign ruler, creating a social contract. The Leviathan, representing this sovereign power, ensures order and security through its authority. Hobbes emphasizes the necessity of absolute obedience to maintain social cohesion, prioritizing stability over individual freedoms.

I suggest that something similar happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, many people were genuinely scared. This was the first global pandemic since the Spanish Flu of 1918, which very few in 2020 lived to remember. From the early days of the pandemic, scientific experts took the lead. Fearing for their lives, many people, especially in the progressive, liberal, educated elites, decided to put their faith in the experts. They surrendered their epistemic right to make up their own minds, and let the experts do this for them. Only by surrendering our



individual thinking to the rational epistemic authority of science could we survive the pandemic, or so they thought.

Once the Epistemic Leviathan was born, any expression of doubt about the experts' official claims, including dissent from other experts, was seen as violating the new social contract, and as endangering our chances of surviving the pandemic. Once we gave the power to the experts, it had to be absolute. I suggest that this is why social media platforms began to zealously remove any claim that deviated from the experts' official line, whether or not it had concrete public-health ramifications. That's how the experts received the power to epistemically coerce, or at least – it's a hypothesis worth pursuing.

As we move past the height of the pandemic, it seems that the Leviathan has dissolved or at least weakened. But we should not be complacent; it may return. Both in politics and in science, surrendering our rights to a Leviathan is a bad idea. Science is full of uncertainties, and thrives on doubt. I have set aside internal epistemic coercion within science, which is a complicated matter; but the teaming up of science with the state to enforce one view is dangerous. Sometimes the best we have to act on is experts' best guesses. It may not be much, but that's what we've always had, including during the pandemic.

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