

EXPERTISE, TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY IN VACCINE POLICY

– Piotr Grzegorz Nowak –

Abstract: This paper introduces the special issue of *Diametros* devoted to discussing “Expertise, Disagreement, and Trust in Vaccine Science and Policy. The Importance of Transparency in a World of Experts” by Alberto Giubilini, Rachel Gur-Arie, and Euzebiusz Jamrozik. In their article, Giubilini et al. argue that expert transparency – particularly regarding disagreements among experts – is ethically crucial for securing public trust in vaccine policy. Several contributors to this issue expand upon that claim. For example, Maciej Macuga proposes that transparency is necessary to make coercive vaccination policies morally legitimate, and Lucie White interprets the core disagreement surrounding vaccine recommendations as a divergence in underlying values. Other authors challenge aspects of Giubilini et al.’s position: Udo Schüklenk and Ben Almassi caution that greater transparency may not bolster trust or improve vaccine uptake, while Ezio Di Nucci presents an analytical argument showing that a purely epistemic notion of expertise leads to paradoxical conclusions – namely, that experts should care neither about trustworthiness, nor trust. Jamie Watson emphasizes that it is the reliable process of producing scientific knowledge that grounds expert trustworthiness. Finally, Elena Popa and Richard Matthews argue that redistributions of power, both in society at large and within expert communities, are necessary to foster genuine trust.

Keywords: trust, trustworthiness, expertise, transparency, values in science, vaccination

Expertise, trust, and transparency are the three intertwined notions that are, as the present issue of *Diametros* shows, of high importance for ethics, bioethics, and epistemology. Trust is usually a good thing.¹ If we did not trust any experts, we would probably lack most of the knowledge² we believe we have, and we would be less efficient in caring for our interests.³ In the case of most of our beliefs, such as the one that the Earth is round,⁴ we do not have time to check the evidence ourselves. We trust experts. Thanks to trust relationships, we can build on others’ experiences, collaborate effectively, and exercise our autonomy⁵. In the case of vaccines, robust trust allows us to benefit from high herd immunity. At the same time, trust can be dangerous: it makes us vulnerable to betrayal⁶ if the people we trust (the trustees) act in bad faith or are otherwise not trustworthy.

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¹ Dimock (2020).

² Hertzberg (1988).

³ Hardin (2004).

⁴ Coady (1994).

⁵ Oshana (2014), McLeod, Ryman (2020).

⁶ Baier (1986).

This issue of *Diametros* focuses on “Expertise, Disagreement, and Trust in Vaccine Science and Policy. The Importance of Transparency in a World of Experts” by Alberto Giubilini, Rachel Gur-Arie, and Euzebiusz Jamrozik. Their paper explores how expertise, transparency, and trust intersect in vaccine research – particularly regarding COVID-19.⁷ They argue that expertise is a notion that is not purely epistemic but has also a social dimension – expertise requires being trusted by the relevant public in the circumstances in which experts’ trustworthiness justifies such trust. According to Giubilini et al.’s model, experts can be trustworthy if they are transparent, acknowledge uncertainties, revise their views in response to the new evidence, and are clear about the values underpinning their recommendations. The authors argue that in approving COVID-19 vaccines for children aged 12-15 during the pandemic’s peak, the regulatory institutions failed to meet these conditions for genuine expertise.

Besides the main paper, the special issue includes six review articles and two commentaries. Some authors contributing to the issue supplement the Giubilini et al.’s position, while others question it to a greater or lesser extent.

Maciej Macuga belongs to the first group.⁸ He considers three related deontological arguments possibly supporting Giubilini et al.’s call for experts’ transparency aimed at showing that it is required because it secures the moral legitimacy of the coercive vaccination policy. The first argument reviewed critically by Macuga involves moral responsibility through the notion that “(...) a person to be held morally responsible for their actions [must] possess (or be culpable of not possessing) a certain degree of understanding of the given act, including its consequences”⁹ and that by disclosing relevant vaccine information, the state would be fulfilling at least one necessary condition for moral responsibility – ensuring people can be held accountable for compliance or non-compliance. The second argument under scrutiny refers to personal autonomy: being autonomous is impossible without having at least some knowledge concerning possible options in a given situation. Macuga points to the shortcomings of both those attempts of justifying transparency in non-consequential terms and introduces the third argument – which he finds the most compelling – related to the obligation of treating people as ends in themselves, not merely as means. As he argues, by being transparent about vaccines, the authorities fulfil this obligation making the coercive program of vaccination morally legitimate – and, conversely, by neglecting transparency they undermine their own legitimacy: a vulnerability which mirrors the exposure of the trusting public to potentially untrustworthy experts.

Lucie White is another author whose contribution primarily supplements Giubilini et al.’s argument.¹⁰ She expands on the scope of the evoked disagreement among experts in the vaccination programs. White contends that what appears to be conflicting recommendations is best explained by varying sets of values among different expert groups. The experts in the UK (The UK’s Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation) decided not to recommend vaccines for children aged 12-15 considering only

⁷ Giubilini et al. (2025).

⁸ Macuga (2025).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ White (2025).

the health-related well-being of the target group. In contrast, experts in the USA (The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices) took into account a more extensive set of values and the perspective of the whole population in justifying their positive recommendation. White points out that even though UK experts did not recommend the vaccine program, they explicitly stated that the values they took into account do not exhaust the set of values pertinent to make a final decision, admitting that they do not have expertise in evaluating the worth of vaccination program from the point of view of benefits and costs unrelated to health. In making recommendations on vaccination policies it is also crucial, according to White, to ensure that the values and standards that inform the expertise are the values and standards of the particular society for which these recommendations are given.

The remaining contributors to the special issue question various aspects of Giubilini et al.'s position. Some point out there is no proof that transparency fosters trust or vaccine uptake.¹¹ Others argue that expertise does not necessarily require transparency,¹² or that experts should not focus on cultivating trust at all.¹³ Still others highlight the need for redistributing power, either among experts themselves or within society at large.¹⁴

Udo Schüklenk argues that there is insufficient evidence for what he sees as Giubilini et al.'s empirical claim – namely, that greater transparency among public health experts will necessarily raise trust or vaccine uptake.¹⁵ Ben Almassi adopts a similar but slightly stronger stance, offering philosophical reasons to doubt that transparency should be counted among a genuine expert's obligations.¹⁶

Almassi points out that in the context of vaccine program recommendations, full transparency might demolish trust and harm members of the public since non-experts lacking specialist scientific knowledge might easily misinterpret the relevant discussions. Following Anette Baier, Almassi upholds that experts are obligated to ask themselves: "Have we been relying on continued ignorance of something by patients and publics who trust us in order to sustain this trust relationship?"¹⁷ If the answer to this question is negative, it means that experts making their vaccination recommendations are trustworthy even though they are not necessarily fully transparent.

Ezio Di Nucci provides a different critical take, one which in contrast to Almassi does see transparency as a condition for expertise, but denies that experts should care about trust or trustworthiness. Di Nucci contends that a strictly epistemic notion of expertise implies that experts should focus solely on evidence, thus paradoxically ignoring whether the public trusts them.

Jamie Watson¹⁸ raises, to some extent, a similar worry as Di Nucci. He argues that expert authority does not require actual trust of the public by pointing out that there is a difference between expertise and expert authority. Being an expert depends on

¹¹ Schüklenk (2025).

¹² Almassi (2025), Watson (2025).

¹³ Di Nucci (2025).

¹⁴ Matthews (2025), Popa (2025).

¹⁵ Schüklenk (2025).

¹⁶ Almassi (2025).

¹⁷ Almassi (2025), cf. Baier (1986).

¹⁸ Watson (2025).

possessing some epistemic features, such as the capacity to contribute meaningfully to some domain or grasp a truth in this domain. In contrast, expert authority is a matter of a normative force – being in the position to make recommendations that others should follow. According to Watson, the trust which is crucial for establishing expertise is not the trust of the public to the expert but rather the trust among experts themselves, since a single person (even an expert) has to base their knowledge on the expertise of others. Watson’s main argument is that what warrants expert authority is a process of producing scientific knowledge in which experts actively participate by conducting research and going through peer review.

The two remaining texts perhaps most strongly emphasize the social aspect of warranting trust in expert recommendations. Elena Popa argues that transparency about expert disagreement is not enough to secure the public’s trust in institutions¹⁹. What is needed is a fair resolution of the expert’s disagreement, which can be accomplished if two conditions are met. First, the input of all relevant members of the scientific community must be taken into consideration. Second, institutions must look for solutions that adequately respond to the public’s needs and interests.

Richard Matthews takes an even stronger position on these matters. He believes that increased transparency will not promote trust in societies characterized by harsh intersectional inequalities²⁰, i.e., the societies in which some groups are institutionally marginalized and oppressed for the benefit of other groups. As he points out, marginalized people distrust public institutions, including public health experts, not primarily because of the lack of expert transparency but because of the history of exploitation. Therefore, what is needed to promote trust is, first and foremost, the just redistribution of power among members of the society.

We can barely function in everyday life without trust. If we refused to trust a pharmacist about whether the medicine she sells is an antibiotic instead of poison, we could die from pneumonia. Trust is so fundamental that individuals who entirely lack it may seem on the verge of psychosis. And yet, as the contributions in this issue of *Diametros* show, knowing when we are justified in trusting specific experts remains fraught. If we follow Giubilini et al.’s advice and trust experts who openly disclose their uncertainties, we may end up paralyzed by indecision. Conversely, if we trust experts who conceal their doubts, we risk feeling betrayed if they are later shown to be mistaken. Adding a further twist, as Di Nucci argues, those experts who most actively seek our trust may be less trustworthy if they sacrifice objectivity for approval. While trust is indispensable, deciding whom to trust - and under what conditions - remains a challenge still largely unsettled, but hopefully further informed by our contributors’ insights and proposed pathways for its meaningful exploration.

¹⁹ Popa (2025).

²⁰ Matthews (2025).

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