

This paper explores the problem of lay choice among competing experts. We live in a world of esoteric knowledge (or claims to knowledge): electronic technology and medicine are famously indistinguishable from magic for most of us. And specialists in economics and international relations lay claim to directing vast sums of money and power through the world. But norms of autonomy and responsibility divert authority away from the masters of these esoteric domains back to us lay people: we must choose which doctor to follow, which prediction to bet on, which political leader to elect.

The situation sounds dire, and is often used as a case for technocratic rule. But I want to suggest some reasons for thinking the possibilities of lay choice are more robust. Specifically, I want to argue, under certain institutional conditions laypersons can rely upon ethical virtues, both on their own parts and as manifested by the competing experts, as proxies for accuracy and sound judgment in the epistemic domain. For example, experts who display the virtues of respect for their interlocutors and individualization of the subjects at issue provide evidence of their ability to discern truth. And lay judges who engage actively in the choice process, taking responsibility for their decisions, can both make better judgments and can obtain greater effect from the judgments they make. These effects can be amplified in conditions of collective choice on the small or mass scale, e.g. with juries or mass democracies.

At this abstract level, there is, then, a connection between certain forms of goodness. I will explore these themes by reference to cases of medical choice, jury decisionmaking, and political choice.