Epistemic autonomy, epistemic paternalism, and blindspots of reason

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ABSTRACT: Paternalistic interventions interfere with a person’s choices for their own good; epistemically paternalistic interventions interfere with a person’s epistemically-oriented processes for their epistemic good. Standard objections to paternalistic interventions claim they violate the autonomy of the interfered-with, and for this reason should be prohibited. Yet, the merits of such objections depend on the nature of autonomy. And, autonomy may be understood in at least two ways: as autarkeia and as self-rule. According to the former, autonomy is a kind of independence or self-reliance; according to the latter, it is the capacity to govern oneself according to a norm, by acting on the basis of a maxim, rule, or reason. Some prevailing arguments about the permissibility of epistemic paternalism adopt a conception of epistemic autonomy as epistemic self-reliance. So understood, external, non-consultative or non-consensual interferences with this “liberty of inquiry” – even those undertaken for the epistemically-oriented processes for the interfered-with – are prima facie violations of the inquirer’s autonomy. This chapter argues that epistemic autonomy is better understood as epistemic self-governance rather than as self-reliance, and that, so understood, certain kinds of epistemically paternalistic interventions are permissible. Inquirers are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, and are thus committed to the norm of belief. Their commitment to these norms can license paternalistic epistemic interventions, even in cases where the inquirer, in their present epistemic circumstances, would not consent to the interference – specifically, when their epistemic circumstance blinds them to the reasons licensing the intervention. This picture yields a new permissibility condition for paternalistic epistemic interventions.

KEYWORDS: epistemic autonomy; epistemic blindspots; epistemic paternalism; norm of belief;

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1 On the Permissibility of Epistemic Paternalism

Paternalistic interventions interfere with a person’s choices for their own good; epistemically paternalistic interventions interfere with a person’s epistemically-oriented processes for their epistemic good.¹ Standard objections to paternalistic interventions claim they violate the autonomy of the interfered-with, and for this reason should be prohibited. Yet, the merits of such objections depend on the nature of autonomy. And, autonomy may be understood in at least two ways: as autarkeia and as self-rule (May 1994). According to the former, autonomy is a kind of independence or self-reliance; according to the latter, it is the capacity to govern oneself according to a norm, by acting on the basis of a maxim, rule, or reason.

Some prevailing arguments about the permissibility of epistemic paternalism adopt a conception of epistemic autonomy as epistemic self-reliance. Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij (2013), for example, explains epistemic autonomy as “the freedom of inquirers to conduct inquiry in whatever way they see fit” (61). Similarly, Emma Bullock (2018) writes: “What I mean by ‘epistemic autonomy’ is sometimes referred to as ‘epistemic self-sufficiency’” (447: note 58). So understood, external, non-consultative or non-consensual interferences with this “liberty of inquiry” – even those undertaken for the epistemic sake of the interfered-with – are prima facie violations of the inquirer’s autonomy.

Following the lead of theorists like Robert Roberts and Jay Wood (2007 ch.10), Linda Zagzebski (2012, 2013), and Catherine Elgin (2013), this chapter argues that epistemic autonomy is better understood as epistemic self-governance rather than as self-reliance, and that, so understood, certain kinds of epistemically paternalistic interventions are permissible. Inquirers are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, and are thus committed to the norm of belief (Adler 2002; Gibbons 2013). Their commitment to these norms can license paternalistic epistemic interventions, even in cases where the inquirer, in their present epistemic circumstances, would not consent to the interference – specifically, when their epistemic circumstance blinds them to the reasons licensing the intervention. This picture yields a new permissibility condition for paternalistic epistemic interventions.

2 Preliminary Considerations

Alvin Goldman (1991) first characterized epistemic paternalism as occurring whenever, in an effort to improve another’s epistemic wellbeing, an agent acts as an informational “gatekeeper,” controlling the other’s access to, or appraisal of, information by interposing their own judgement about the evidential value of that information, rather than allowing...

¹ In advocating for a modest epistemic paternalism, according to which “epistemic paternalism is not solely concerned with promoting a specifically epistemic kind of goodness,” Duncan Pritchard (2013: 28f., 30) distinguishes several ways that epistemically paternalistic interventions might be motivated according to different ways that epistemic goods are valued. Against this, Emma Bullock (2018: 444) contends we lack good grounds for distinctively epistemically paternalistic interventions, writing “whilst the strict epistemic paternalist can avoid the collapse into general paternalism this comes at the cost of its plausibility.”
the other to exercise their own judgement (119). Goldman focused on exercises of paternalistically-motivated control that “weed out” information by preventing or limiting a cognitive agent’s access to, or use of, it (120). Similarly, Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) construes epistemically paternalistic interventions as constraints on an inquirer’s access to, or collection, use, or appraisal of the probative value of, information (cf. Bishop 2014). Yet, the control of information isn’t limited to constraints like withholding or concealing (making information “available,” though not readily discoverable or accessible by, for example, burying it in the fine print). Informational control can also include actively communicating information by calling another’s attention to it, or presenting it in such a way as to help another make better sense of it (Grill and Hansson 2005). Rather than as acts of censorship or constraint, acts of epistemic paternalism are better conceived more broadly as efforts to curate another’s informational environment (e.g., by selecting, ordering, and presenting information) for the end of their epistemic wellbeing.

The perspective offered by this broader conceptualization affords two important observations. First, our ordinary informational environments, including those that we might undertake to paternalistically curate, are, typically, already highly engineered, if not polluted. Regrettably, the regulatory systems for our informational economies often prioritize the interests of those making the intervention, rather than a concern for our wellbeing, epistemic or otherwise. While speedometers, like seatbelts, are there for the benefit of drivers (among others), roadside billboards distract drivers and seldom give information that is even remotely pertinent to their proximate epistemic concerns. Moreover, self-interested engineers of our informational environments have a motivation to – and will, if they’re any good at what they do – exploit the very cognitive foibles in us that, according to Ahlstrom-Vij (2013), establish that we cannot rely on ourselves for our own epistemic improvement. Paternalistic interventions, then, do not merely protect us from ourselves. Rather, they additionally mitigate the interferences of non-paternalistically motivated actors.

2 Some theorists (e.g., Goldman 1991, Ahlstrom-Vij 2013, 2013a) offer an exclusively veritistic conception of our epistemic ends and interests. Goldman, for example, writes: “I have been equating epistemically valuable outcomes with true belief and error avoidance” (1991: 125). Others (e.g., Kvanvig 2003, 2005, Pritchard 2013, Bishop 2014, Carter 2017, Elgin 2017, Croce 2018) include goods like understanding and reasoning as having epistemic value. For example, Duncan Pritchard argues that “some epistemic standings [specifically understanding], over and above mere true belief, have a goodness which is good simpliciter” (20). In view of Jonathan Kvanvig’s (2008) observations about “pointless truths” and Chase Wrenn’s (2017) arguments on truth’s intrinsic value, I am inclined to a conception of epistemic value that extends beyond mere true belief. Indeed, Michel Croce’s case of Prof. Everyt Solved thoughtlessly providing her student the answer to an assigned problem he was still working out for himself provides a case of epistemic paternalism that satisfies the ends of inquiry, veritistically conceived, while not maximally improving the student’s epistemic circumstance by allowing them discover for themselves, and thereby better understand the reasons for, the solution (2018: 312f.). Plausibly, this does not maximally improve the student’s epistemic wellbeing or enhance their epistemic agency. Relatedly, your feeding me a steady diet of useful truths which I thereby come to justifiably believe might nevertheless diminish my epistemic autonomy if, e.g., my acquiring those true beliefs is not creditable to me. Despite my being better informed, my capacity as a knower, and thus my intellectual agency, is diminished (cf. Pritchard 2010; Carter 2017). While I am inclined to such broader conceptions of epistemic value, the case I make for the permissibility of epistemic paternalism seeks to succeed also under the narrower, exclusively veritistic conception.
As such, when considering the permissibility of epistemic paternalism, we should recognize that neither the context nor the default (resulting from non-action) of such decisions is neutral. Timid policies of paternalistic epistemic intervention that favor putatively “free,” self-regulating, informational markets do not preserve the intellectual autonomy of inquirers in those informational environments. Instead, they allow non-paternalistically motivated interferences with the autonomy of inquirers, and relinquish control of the epistemic and social goods at stake to those actors already occupying positions of power in the informational economy. This observation yields an argument supporting Goldman’s suggestion that “successful pursuit of epistemic ends depends not only on ‘deregulation’ at the highest levels, but on wise regulation at lower levels” (1991: 131).

Second, we should recognize that paternalistic epistemic interventions in our ordinary informational commerce (both interpersonal and institutional) are commonplace and often innocuous. We routinely “control” the flow of information to others in the course of our everyday interactions. Purposeful communication, including designing our acts of reasoning-giving, is the curation of the presentation of information to another. And designing “choice architectures” in cognitively ergonomic ways, e.g., with nudges, is to present reasons not to bypass reasoning (Levy 2019). Ordinarily, we do not resent such nudges or interruptions of our trains of thought and talk as infringements of our intellectual autonomy. Rather, they are just part of social life. Typically, it is only after such interventions that we judge them praiseworthy or condemnable, largely on the basis of whether their results were welcome.

Uncontroversially, some ordinary forms of epistemic paternalism, like “mansplaining,” cause epistemic harms, and ought to be criticized on precisely these grounds (Solnit 2008; Rothman 2012). Indeed, if they undermine another’s agency as a knower, acts of epistemic paternalism can cause, or consist in, epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007). Even when such acts are benevolently motivated, the beneficence of the act can be mitigated by other traits of the actor like intellectual hubris or reprehensible, pernicious ignorance. The very cognitive foibles motivating paternalistic interferences – our tendencies towards bias and overconfidence – can infect the intentions of the paternalistic interferer. Yet, granting all this, other ordinary forms of epistemic paternalism, from “whistle blowing” and warning labels to volunteering and demanding reasons, seem uncontroversially praiseworthy – exemplifying virtues like intellectual responsibility, courage, and open-mindedness, and enhancing the epistemic agency of others.

3 Epistemic Paternalism

Michel Croce characterizes Goldman’s conception of epistemic paternalism as having two fundamental features: protection and interposition (2018: 307). The paternalist interposes their judgement within another’s process of inquiry for the sake of advancing the other’s epistemic interests. Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) similarly defines epistemic paternalism

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3 Dworkin (1988) offers a similar pair of distinguishing characteristics, substitution and promotion, describing paternalistic acts as those which “attempt to substitute one person’s judgement for another’s, to promote the latter’s benefit” (123).
according to three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions (cf. Bullock 2018: 343). An epistemically paternalistic intervention:

[1] interferes with the freedom of inquirers to conduct inquiry in whatever way they see fit (the interference condition)
[2] without consulting those interfered with on the issue of whether they should be interfered with in the relevant manner (the non-consultation condition), and …

Prima facie, and despite their beneficent motivations, such interferences seem to infringe on another’s epistemic autonomy. And, as Gerald Dworkin writes about paternalism in practical affairs, “it is because of the violation of the autonomy of others that normative questions about the justification of paternalism arise” (1988: 123). Yet, in order to judge the permissibility of epistemically paternalistic interferences, we must consider the nature of intellectual autonomy.

4 Intellectual Autonomy

Rational autonomy, Immanuel Kant tells us, consists in our ability to make use of our understanding “without direction from another.” According to R.S. Downie and Elizabeth Telfer (1971), “an autonomous agent, must be independent-minded … [and] not have to depend on others for being told what … to think or do” (301). Goldman (1991) characterizes rational autonomy as a kind of intellectual sovereignty, citing T.M. Scanlon’s conception:

To regard himself as autonomous … a person must see himself as sovereign in deciding what to believe and in weighing competing reasons for action. He must apply to these tasks his own canons of rationality, and must recognize the need to defend his beliefs and decisions in accordance with these canons. (Scanlon 1972: 215)

These descriptions sketch an ambiguous picture of autonomy, one aspect of which is autarkeia, the other self-rule (May 1994: 134).

Viewed as autarkeia, autonomy is a kind of independence or self-sufficiency whereby epistemic agency consists in not having to rely upon, confer with, or defer to others. Elizabeth Fricker describes the ideal of such an autonomous knower as someone who “takes no one else’s word for anything, but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties and investigative and inferential powers” (2006: 225).4 Understood as self-rule, autonomy is the capacity to govern oneself according

4 Importantly, Fricker, together with virtually every author cited in this chapter who has written on the topic, ultimately rejects as untenable, if not incoherent, such a characterization of the ideal of epistemic autonomy as complete epistemic independence or self-reliance.
to a norm, by acting on the basis of a maxim, rule, or reason, whereby epistemic agency consists in a kind of self-directed self-governance or self-regulation, according to norms that are not imposed upon one. On this ideal, Catherine Elgin describes: “Epistemic agents should think of themselves as, and act as, legislating members of a realm of epistemic ends: they make the rules, devise the methods, and set the standards that bind them” (2013: 135). When constructing his argument for the permissibility of epistemic paternalism, Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) conspicuously takes the former conception of autonomy as independence as his primary target.5 Perhaps his reason for doing so is that autonomy as independence makes the greatest claim to freedom from external interference. As May writes, while “autonomy as autarkeia views external factors as incompatible with autonomy, … autonomy as self-rule allows external factors to influence the determination of action without eliminating the autonomy of the agent” (1994: 134). And, Ahlstrom-Vij concludes that even when understood as autarkeia, autonomy offers no conclusive grounds for objecting to paternalistic interferences.

In a certain sense, we are all epistemically self-reliant. “Self trust,” as Zagzebski notes, “is a rational requirement” (2007: 58). Such epistemic self-reliance is part of what it is to have been conferred a berth on Neurath’s ship. Yet, this is not to say that we are epistemically independent; quite the opposite (Hardwig 2005). Rather it is to say that we have to rely on our own competence in judging the limits of our own competence. Just as we must in judging when our belief-set stands in need of repair, we must rely on our own best rational lights when deciding whether, when, and whom to consult with and defer to (Zagzebski 2013). But this is to be epistemically self-guiding – not self-sufficient. May writes: “We, as the ‘helmsmen’ of our own lives, steer toward various forms of authority in certain facets of life, and away from authority in others. We are not self-sufficient, but this does not mean that we do not ‘rule’ our own lives” (1994: 135).

As J. Adam Carter (2017) argues, those who never allow their intellect to be guided by another disvalue epistemic dependence to their own detriment in ways that self-undermine their own intellectual agency: “virtuous intellectual autonomy simply cannot mean, as Roberts and Wood [2007: 259–60] put it, ‘that one never relies on the intellectual labor of another.’” Indeed, John Hardwig (2011) puts this point more strongly: “as long as epistemic autonomy brings with it epistemic variegation, it seems unlikely that my epistemic autonomy is a good thing for me. It would be epistemically better for me – assuming that I want true or justified beliefs – if I were a free rider on the autonomy of my predecessors and perhaps also that of my epistemic superiors.”

Finally, as Zagzebski (2013) points out, a will can be heteronomous in at least two ways: “when it is controlled by a will outside of it,” and “when it is determined by forces within the self other than reason—by inclination or fancy. … If we are not fully rational when our wills are pushed around, then we are not fully rational when our intellects are pushed around, whatever ‘pushed around’ amounts to” (247, 248, emphasis added). As such, we should be just as concerned about agent-internal causes of the loss, diminishment,

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5 While Ahlstrom-Vij presents Chapter 4 as an unsuccessful search for a conception of autonomy under which epistemic paternalism might be prohibited, each is characterized in terms of the independence of the epistemic agent.
and enhancement of our epistemic agency as we are about agent-external causes. That is, we should hold ourselves just as accountable for the care of our epistemic agency as we are inclined to do of those around us.

5 Intellectual Autonomy and the “Freedom” of Inquiry

As I read him, the picture of autonomy as autarkeia adopted by Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) seems closely tied to his interference condition for epistemic paternalism:

[T]ake the relevant kind of interference to be an interference with the extent to which an agent can go about doing inquiry in whatever way she sees fit… Someone is interfering with the inquiry of another if the former is compromising the latter’s freedom to conduct inquiry in whatever way she happens to desire and … someone is free to conduct inquiry thus if she is free from constraints imposed by others on her ability to access, collect, and evaluate information in whatever way she happens to see fit. (40-41, emphasis added)

So conceived, epistemic autonomy seems to consist in a “liberty of inquiry” – a freedom to conduct inquiry without external interference or encumbrance. In this context, Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) summarizes his basic case for epistemic paternalism as follows: “our dual tendency for bias and overconfidence makes it unlikely that we can rely on ourselves for epistemic improvement, and that our best bet when it comes to promoting our epistemic good is to have external constraints imposed that restrict our freedom to conduct inquiry in whatever way we see fit” (177).

Yet, before asking whether any external constraints may restrict any freedom of inquiry, it is worth asking: What are the internal constraints? For example, are inquirers free to believe what they know to be, or what seems to them to be, false? May they believe on the basis of insufficient evidence? May inquirers ignore evidence? Are they free to believe by wishful thinking or form beliefs by inclination or fancy?

I answer: “No.” “When engaging in inquiry,” Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) claims, “we are engaging in a pursuit of epistemic goals … taking the formation of true belief and the avoidance of false belief to be the paradigm goals of epistemic practices” (40). The nature of belief prescribes its own norms (Adler 2002; Gibbons 2013). Belief aims at truth; and the truth-conditions for belief are transparent to, and grounded in, the truth-conditions of what is believed. So, to the extent that our propositional attitudes do not covary with what we apprehend as true, they cease to be beliefs. Relatedly, our epistemic justification is what

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6 “Freedom” of inquiry might be understood in a different sense. It might be said that there is a liberty to undertake, rather than conduct, inquiry freely – i.e., to investigate whatever matters one deems worthy of inquiry to satisfy their intellectual curiosity or in pursuance of their practical ends. While some courses of inquiry might be criticized as frivolous, futile, inopportune, or immoral, there seems to be an important degree of liberty in selecting one’s topics of inquiry. One might, for example, answer a criticism that one should rather inquire into this matter than that merely by saying, “But I’d rather investigate that than this; I find it more stimulating.” Requiring or coercively incentivizing inquirers to direct their inquiries towards these permissible intellectual ends rather than those seems to infringe on an intellectual liberty.
we take to reveal, or make manifest, the truth of our beliefs. As such, to the extent that our credences are not proportioned to the strength of our justifications, they cease to be beliefs. And, in normal cases, to the extent that we cannot speak to our reasons for believing and hold ourselves answerable to our epistemic responsibilities, our beliefs cease to be rationally, or justifiably, held (Brandom 1998). As believers we are constitutively subject the norms of belief. Thus, epistemic autonomy properly consists in according one’s believings to the norms of belief.

This, I contend, gets at a proper understanding of epistemic autonomy as epistemic self-governance.7 The only beings capable of being epistemically interfered with, indeed the only beings capable of being intellectually autonomous, are epistemic agents: players in the knowledge game. As Wilfrid Sellars put it: “In characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says” ([1956] 1997 §36). In virtue of our epistemic agency – by being believers, by engaging in inquiry, by making assertions and knowledge claims – we commit ourselves to the norm of belief. We may not simply “opt out” of the norms that constitute and govern the space of reasons without thereby relinquishing our very epistemic agency.

I take this to indicate an important disanalogy between epistemic autonomy and autonomy of the will, and thereby the resultant operation of paternalism in each domain. In practical affairs, paternalistic interferences can unjustifiably infringe on someone’s autonomy simply because they don’t want to improve their performance in the relevant (permissible but non-obligatory) activity or their realization of the relevant good. When you, having seen me play tennis badly, undertake to interfere with my liberty in order to make me a better tennis player (by, say, hiring a tennis coach for me), I may justifiably object: “I know I play tennis badly, but I don’t want to play any better. I would rather pursue other, equally worthwhile, ends.” There is no case to be made for your replying to my rebuff of your well-meant intervention by saying, “Well, you ought to want to be a better tennis player.” By contrast, the same move is not available to me in the case of belief. I may not coherently, let alone justifiably, respond to your criticisms or resist your interventions for my epistemic improvement by claiming “I know I believe badly, but then I don’t want to believe any better.”8 Such a response jeopardizes my standing as – if not renounces my claim to be – an inquirer and a believer. (Rather, any cause for my objection must instead be that your interventions won’t make me a better believer.)

Any coherent understanding of the “liberty of inquiry” must preserve the nature of inquiry and the status of inquirers qua epistemic agents. Thus, countenancing disinclinations to epistemic improvement as reasons justifying refusals to consent to epistemically paternalistic interventions – whether under the guise of some putative “liberty of inquiry” or otherwise – risks the very epistemic agency and autonomy we are concerned to preserve in our worries about the permissibility of epistemically paternalistic interventions. Generally, believers and inquirers are not at liberty to withhold consent to paternalistic epistemic interventions. Rather, epistemic agents are constitutively and

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7 I take this to be broadly consistent with Zagzeski’s (2013) account of intellectual autonomy.
8 Cf. Wittgenstein’s ([1929] 1956) distinction between judgments of absolute and relative value.
irrevocably committed to the norms, goods, and ends that generally motivate paternalistic epistemic interventions. This provides a presumptive (i.e., default but defeasible) reason for the general permissibility of paternalistic epistemic interventions and against their consisting in any objectionable infringement of the intellectual autonomy of inquirers.

6 Paternalistic Interferences and the Blindspots of Reason

As already noted, Ahlstrom-Vij’s (2013) primary reason for the permissibility of epistemic paternalism is that our cognitive limitations and proclivities make it “unlikely that we can rely on ourselves for epistemic improvement” (177). One thing that makes us unable to rely on ourselves in certain epistemic situations is that each of us has epistemic blindspots—contingently true claims that are “idiosyncratically inaccessible” to us because of our constitution or situation (Sorensen 1988: 3).

The Permissibility of Epistemic Self-Censorship

An awareness of our epistemic blindspots can provide us with reason to consent to paternalistic epistemic interventions. To make this case, consider an example due to Roy Sorensen (2018), which gives an epistemic analog of Odysseus’s prudential choice to have himself tied to the mast of his ship, voluntarily restricting his liberty in order to prevent his falling victim to the enchanting spell of the Sirens’ call and thereby suffering a greater loss of his autonomy. Sorensen makes the case for the permissibility of acting against the principle of total evidence in cases where (i) we know that some specific evidence is misleading but (ii) we don’t know how it is misleading, such that (iii) we are not in a position to correct for it. In such cases, he claims, we may engage in epistemic self-censorship, by ignoring relevant evidence.

In arguing for this claim, Sorensen considers the case of Miss Lead, a knowledge saboteur who is an occasional source of information that, if given, is unfailingly true, but is, undetectably to the recipient, misleading evidence to the matter under inquiry. Thus, Miss Lead is a source of apparently good, but undetectably bad, defeaters to one’s knowledge claims and justifications. Miss Lead delivers her snippets of epistemic maleficence via sealed packets of (occasionally blank) documents, which we, knowing of Miss Lead’s character and practices, must decide whether or not to open.

Consider now a situation where we correctly and justifiably take ourselves to be in a position to know that \( p \), and, just as we are about to report what we know, we receive one of Miss Lead’s infamous packets. Should we open it? Among the reasons against opening the packet are: First, “Keeping yourself ignorant of some facts can preserve knowledge of other facts,” and, second, the following dominance argument:

[Miss Lead’s] packet either has no evidence or misleading evidence. If there is no evidence, you gain nothing. If there is misleading evidence, you lose the knowledge you have. So opening the packet leaves you either no better off or worse off. By not opening the packet you are guaranteed an outcome at least as good as offered by opening – and perhaps better. (Sorensen 2018)
The reasons in favor of opening the packet insist that even misleading evidence is evidence and thus, by the principle of total evidence, may not to be ignored. Moreover, individual pieces of misleading evidence can (sometimes) be combined (if properly arranged) so as to cancel out the misleading aspects of each, in order to point properly at the truth. So, by worsening our present epistemic position, we might be able to improve it in the future. Finally there’s a dominance argument for opening the packet: Merely receiving the packet itself constitutes a defeater to our knowledge claim that $p$. Opening the packet might reveal a blank page, in which case our knowledge is restored. Thus, “those who refuse to open the packet lose their sole chance to really know. So you might as well open the packet and hope for the best!” (Sorensen 2018).

Importantly, Miss Lead exploits a permanent vulnerability of our (defeasibly justified) knowledge to misleading defeaters (Harman 1973). So long as there is a gap between justification and truth, Sorensen reminds us, “there will always be a truth whose discovery would undermine the knower’s warrant.” Richard Feldman (2003) elaborates on this point: If we can ordinarily know things, then there can be other truths such that if we learned them, we would undermine our justification for the thing we know. But some of these defeaters are misleading. That is, we actually know things, but we would not know them if we learned about these [misleading] defeaters. We are lucky not to know about the defeaters. (35-36 emphasis added)

Suppose we are faced with such an epistemic dilemma, what ought we do? How ought we to conduct our inquiry? While Sorensen advises us against opening Miss Lead’s packet on the grounds that “your rationality is brought into question if you wittingly choose to enter a rationality trap,” one would hope for a better option.

One such epistemically preferable option would be that, unbeknownst to us, A. “Lucky” Chance were to pass by and surreptitiously remove Miss Lead’s packet before it came to our attention. (Ideally, Lucky would return with the packet once we were so positioned that we would not fall victim to the epistemic misfortunes that would befall us by presently discovering it.) Preferable even to Lucky’s intervention would be that we should, having received Miss Lead’s packet, promptly consult Count E.R. Rebuttal, who is on to Miss Lead’s wily ways and can unfailingly provide us with a second packet containing a defeater for her misleading defeater. Should we know someone like the Count, we ought to consult them.

The morals of this story so far are these: First, according to Sorensen, it is sometimes rationally permissible to epistemically self-censor by ignoring relevant evidence so as to not risk losing knowledge due to misleading evidence. Second, this seems to be a case of rational, consensual epistemic self-paternalism. That is, it seems to provide us with reasons justifying our curation – indeed, censorship – of our epistemic surroundings for our own epistemic benefit. Third, there are recognizably better options to epistemic self-censorship, if only they were available to us.
From Epistemic Self-Censorship to Epistemic Paternalism

Despite its distinctive character as a “rationality trap,” Sorensen’s epistemic dilemma at least affords its victim the position to know that they are being misled, even though they are not in a position to do anything about it short of ignoring evidence. Here, we suffer from an epistemic blindspot which, while recognizable to us, we cannot rely on ourselves to optimally correct for. Yet, knowing our epistemic circumstances, we are at least in a position to recognize that we ought to seek out epistemic guidance (or at least hope for some interference) as a way of improving our epistemic situation. That is, we are in a position to know that we ought to consent to certain kinds of epistemic interventions – specifically, ones that we judge will leave us epistemically better off.

A position worse than this is one where we are not even in a position to know that we are somehow being misled by the evidence. Now we have a blindspot we’re not even aware of – a blindspot for our blindspot, if you will. Yet, importantly, other than that, our epistemic situation has not changed. In particular, the very same reasons that, when accessible to us, motivated and justified our seeking out the epistemic guidance of Count E.R. Rebuttal, remain – it’s just that they’re presently inaccessible to us. That is, while there is reason for us to consult or defer, the problem is that those reasons are not apparent to us. Were we to have them (i.e., recognize them as reasons for us), they would motivate and justify our seeking external epistemic guidance. Moreover, something else that hasn’t changed is that these reasons justify our seeking outside epistemic assistance. They are evidence of an epistemic problem that we cannot fix by ourselves. Yet, were those reasons accessible to an epistemic authority who had our epistemic best-interests at heart – say, an epistemic paternalist – then they might be able to act on those reasons in our stead precisely because we cannot do so ourselves.

Suppose, for example, that Vic is the victim of a “blindspot blindspot.” He’s unaware of a blindspot of the sort we have been considering throughout the chapter (e.g., his inquiries are detrimentally affected in ways he cannot detect by internal biases, coercive agents, or a polluted informational environment that is also undetectable by him). Patty, the epistemic paternalist, is, and justifiably believes herself to be, an epistemic authority in a position to improve Vic’s epistemic situation and reveal Vic’s blindspots to him, yet only in ways that, in his present epistemic state, Vic would not consent to. To Vic it seems that he has every reason to refuse Patty’s intervention. May Patty intervene? From our point of view, the answer should be “Yes.” Indeed she should. And Vic’s commitment to the norm of belief, together with those reasons, inaccessible to him, for consenting to, indeed seeking out, external epistemic help, permits the intervention, even though he would not presently consent.

9 Cf. Robert Audi’s (1986: 29) distinction between reasons to believe, reasons for S to believe, and reasons S has for believing.

10 By “epistemic authority” I have in mind the kind of epistemic superior – rather than expert – envisioned by Croce (2018). He defines an epistemic authority an epistemic agent who “has the capacity to help [another] achieve epistemic goals in [some, perhaps very local domain] that [the other] might not be able to achieve on [their] own” (315). Later, Croce elaborates: “On the broad conception of epistemic superiority endorsed here, one can be better epistemically positioned than another in a very local way – for example, by lacking a relevant bias or being able to spot it in other people in a given circumstance” (319).
As I see it, this is the locus of the tension between epistemic autonomy and paternalistic epistemic intervention. While it seems to Vic as though he has no good reason to consent to Patty’s intervention, in fact he does. According to the norm of belief, there is every reason for Vic to consent to Patty’s epistemic intervention, even though he cannot access or recognize those reasons. Vic’s problem is that he has (something like) the following additional epistemic blindspot: I believe that I have no good reason to consent to Patty’s intervention, even though I do. Notice that, while true, Vic cannot coherently have this thought. Indeed, Vic’s ignorance of this truth is explained by its idiosyncratic inaccessibility to him given his present epistemic situation. Hence, it cannot constitute his reason for self-correction or seeking epistemic aid. Notice finally that Patty can coherently and justifiably have each of these thoughts, and that they supply her with good reasons to intervene in Vic’s epistemic endeavors. Ironically, only Patty’s intervention will allow Vic to recognize his blindspot(s), thereby making the reasons justifying the intervention accessible to him.

8 Consent After the Fact: A Permissibility Condition for Paternalistic Epistemic Interferences

According to Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) epistemic paternalism is justified if it satisfies the alignment condition – that the epistemic reasons motivating the interference align with any non-epistemic reasons – and the burden of proof condition – that evidence indicates that the interference will leave those interfered with epistemically better off relative to other options (117, 122). Importantly, the burden of proof condition is stated in purely externalist terms. Neither the evidence indicating epistemic improvement nor the epistemic improvement itself need to be accessible to, let alone recognized by, the epistemically interfered-with. That is, we may, according to Ahlstrom-Vij, be paternalistically interfered with in ways that we never consent to even if both the reasons behind the intervention and its success or failure are perennially inaccessible to us. The condition of the interfered-with can be epistemically improved without their ever recognizing it.

Viewed in this way, perhaps we are right to worry about the permissibility of epistemic paternalism, since it really does seem to jeopardize our intellectual autonomy. While we might end up with an improved ratio of true beliefs to error and ignorance, we could hardly call those beliefs acquired via such interventions knowledge in anything but an externalist sense. Relatedly, our epistemic agency, understood as our capacity as a self-reliant, self-regulating knower can hardly be said to have been enhanced. Rather, it seems to have been diminished.

The analysis offered herein suggests a new, higher standard for the permissibility of epistemic paternalism which, I contend, better respects the epistemic agency of the paternalistically interfered-with. Such a standard incorporates some permissibility condition internally accessible from within the perspective of the interfered-with. Yet, given the nature of the epistemic blindspots addressed by paternalistic interventions, we cannot expect to satisfy this condition prior to the intervention itself. Instead, I suggest something along these lines: Paternalistic epistemic interventions are ideally permissible when, as a result of the intervention, the epistemic improvement afforded to the interfered-
with provides them access to the reasons justifying the interference according to the norm of belief. Ideally, this will make visible to the interfered-with those blindspots that prevented them from being fully epistemically autonomous in this regard prior to the intervention. Also ideally, as a result of their recognizing these blindspots and coming to possess those reasons, the interfered-with will not only be in a position to—indeed will come to—reflectively endorse the reasons for, and permissibility and benefits of, the paternalistic intervention (cf. Zagzebski 2013). But, they will come to grant this consent only after, indeed as a result of, the intervention itself.\(^{11}\)

At the very least, raising the permissibility bar for paternalistic epistemic interventions hopes to impress upon epistemic paternalists that, rather than merely improving the epistemic situation of another agent, they ought to aim to enhance that agent’s agency. One way that epistemic paternalists can do this is to hold themselves accountable to a standard of post-interference, reflective endorsement on the part of the interfered-with. Satisfying some condition of this sort is at least part of what I take to be involved in treating others as “legislating members of the realm of epistemic ends” —that is, as maximally autonomous epistemic agents, even in sub-optimal circumstances (Elgin 2013: 135).\(^{12}\)

9 Conclusion

Paradoxically, acts of epistemic paternalism seem to interfere with another’s intellectual autonomy, but for their epistemic sake. By interposing their judgement within another’s process of inquiry, the epistemic paternalist aims to aid the interfered-with in acquiring some epistemic good, thereby improving their epistemic situation. So understood, both the possibility and the permissibility of epistemic paternalism depend, essentially, on our being epistemic agents and on the nature of epistemic autonomy. Epistemic autonomy, I have argued, is properly conceived of, not as epistemic self-sufficiency, but as self-governance according to the norm of belief—norms to which all epistemic agents are constitutively committed. This commitment supplies a presumptive reason permitting paternalistic epistemic interventions: Even without prior consultation or consent, inquirers cannot simply decline genuine efforts to improve their epistemic situation without thereby forsaking their epistemic agency. Yet, even successful paternalistic interferences can diminish another’s epistemic autonomy should they go unrecognized. Thus, rather than merely improve another inquirer’s epistemic situation, epistemic paternalists should also seek to enhance their epistemic agency. One measure for such agential enhancement is that as a result of the paternalistic interference, the interfered-with is in a position to reflectively endorse the reasons for, and the permissibility and benefits of, the paternalistic intervention.

\(^{11}\) Should this occur, they would have an additional reason not to object to the intervention as it occurs. Plausibly, among the principles we, believers, ought to subscribe to is one prescribing that we ought to defer our judgements to our epistemic superiors—those in a better position to know. And, should Patty intervene, Vic’s future self would be in a better position to know whether her intervention would be epistemically justified and beneficial to him. Thus, Vic should defer his judgement to his future epistemic self.

\(^{12}\) Of course, even this permissibility condition is susceptible to pernicious, maleficent exploitation—gaslighting might be such an example.
References


