

Norms of Inquiry, Student-Led Learning, and Epistemic Paternalism

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Abstract. Should we implement epistemically paternalistic measures outside of the narrow range of cases, like legal trials, in which their benefits and justifiability seem clear-cut? In this chapter I draw on theories of student-led pedagogy, and Jane Friedman's work on norms of inquiry, to argue against this prospect. The key contention in the chapter is that facts about an inquirer's interests and temperament have a bearing on whether it is better for her to, at any given moment, pursue epistemic goods via outward-facing evidence-acquisition, or in a more introspective, ratiocinative fashion. This makes problems for any non-consultative approach to assisting people in inquiry, and speaks in favor of approaches which, as with student-led pedagogy, aim to 'tap into' the inquirer's interests and temperament in helping them to learn.

1. Introduction

There is a compelling case for epistemic paternalism – roughly: interfering with people's inquiry, in order to make it go better – in certain narrowly-defined scenarios. Evidence control in law is one example that's routinely cited in work on this topic. We set things up in legal trials so that jurors can't access all the evidence that's relevant to a case. We don't let jurors themselves decide whether to review hearsay evidence or information about the defendant's prior convictions, and this is because having access to that evidence makes it less likely that jurors will accurately judge the facts of the case. Similar logic applies to fact-finding situations in everyday life. Suppose I'm asking for my colleague's opinion on

whether a student might have paid someone else to write his essay. I have a few bits of evidence that lead me to suspect as much, so I ask my colleague for her take on what that evidence shows. But I may decide to withhold one specific piece of (potentially) relevant evidence, e.g. the defensive reaction my student had when I raised my worries with him. I may think that this piece of evidence is easily misinterpretable, and that my colleague's take on the situation will be more reliable if they aren't trying to factor in this evidence.

I take the in-principle justifiability of epistemic paternalism in cases like these to be a settled conclusion (see Goldman 1991: 115-21; Ahlstrom-Vij 2013: 138-53). But it is an open question whether we should use information control and other epistemic paternalistic measures outside of the specific contexts in which their justifiability appears to be clear-cut. There are lots of people today believing lots of falsehoods (e.g. related to public health, or the climate crisis) that have the potential to result in lots of harm. It seems possible that a well-designed system of information control, e.g. involving legal penalties for spreading misinformation online, could reduce the prevalence of these false beliefs and mitigate the harms. And a similar rationale to the one that we saw in the fact-finding cases seemingly speaks in favor of this. If we let people see all the notionally relevant evidence, they're liable to be led astray by misleading bits of evidence. So we should filter the evidence we make available to people based on what evidence is most likely to result in people forming true beliefs.¹

I want to identify some factors that speak against any such scaled-up, further-reaching program of epistemic paternalism. There are good reasons to worry about practices of non-consultative information control being misused or abused.² There are also reasons to worry about how a widespread program of information control could lead to longer-term epistemic disutility, by pushing us towards a broadly dysfunctional social-epistemic culture. Respectful consultation between experts and their clients encourages a culture where people listen, trust, venture ideas, and deepen their understanding of the world through dialogue. Widespread information control may be incompatible with this sort of culture.

The worries I have in mind are related, but they run in a slightly different direction. Epistemically benefiting people is about helping them to get true beliefs, knowledge, understanding, etc. But as we know from our own experience as inquirers, acquiring and retaining these epistemic goods isn't a linear, forward

¹ For an argument in defence of this approach to science communication, see e.g. John (2017).

² Bullock (2018) and Basham (2020) discuss some worries along these lines. Of course no advocate of epistemic paternalism will want to defend abuses of epistemically paternalistic techniques, which aim to deceive, hurt, or dominate people. However, the concern I am adverting to is much like that which surrounds calls for apparently beneficent uses of state censorship. If we give state agencies the power to censor, it seems likely that maleficent actors will seek control of that power in order to abuse it. There is a kind of *Field of Dreams* logic behind this worry: "if you build it (an apparatus of state censorship or information control), they (people who want to put that apparatus to tyrannical use) will come".

march. We forget things. Information goes in one ear and out the other. We learn things that mean nothing to us, or we fail to learn things because we can't get interested in them in the right way. At every turn, our interests and temperament affect our ability to learn, as well as our retention and continued understanding of what we have already learned.

The information controller must take himself to have a good idea as to what information is likely to lead other people towards accurate beliefs, and what is likely to confuse or mislead them. But the epistemic benefits of information control in a given case don't just depend on the 'raw' tendencies of certain bits of information. They also depend on how an inquirer's interests, temperament, and overall state of mind orient them toward the range of possible inquiries and other epistemic 'tasks' that they might pursue at any given moment. A *non-consultative* information controller will rarely be in a position to know how all these other factors are in play: which inquiries are likely to be most fruitful, which learning is likely to be retained, and which epistemic tasks are most likely to yield epistemic benefits, given the inquirer's state of mind at a particular moment. To use a broad simile: non-consultative information controllers are a bit like an inflexible teacher with a rigid mindset about the content of his syllabus. He aims to transmit the optimal package of information, given his expert insight about what his students, taken as a cohort, ought to know. But this simile gives us a sense of the limitations of non-consultative information control. It tries to be epistemically beneficent, but it doesn't avail itself of insights into the learner-specific factors that bear on its effectiveness. This may not be a problem in narrow fact-finding cases, where the 'learning agenda' is settled in advance. But it is an issue if we intend to 'go paternalistic' in a wider range of scenarios.³

I will develop the argument sketched above across four sections. In §2 I discuss how the open-ended nature of people's interests makes it hard to epistemically benefit people non-consultatively. In §3 I consider how people's individual temperaments have an effect on the success of their inquiries, and why this also makes it hard to epistemically benefit people non-consultatively. In §4 I expand on the suggestions outlined above, about educational practices, and consider how a student-led approach to teaching and learning may be justified on epistemic grounds. And in §5 I discuss how we should think about epistemic autonomy, having recognized the importance of individuals' interests and temperaments vis-à-vis the success of their inquiry.

³ My argument loosely resembles an old-fashioned argument against paternalism, roughly, that the paternaliser is rarely in a position to know enough about the paternalisee's interests or preferences to effectively confer the benefits they're seeking to confer. See Sugden (2008) for a discussion and defence of these kinds of arguments against paternalism, in the face of challenges from proponents of nudging.

2. Open-ended inquiry

Let's get a sharper definition on the table. Epistemic paternalism means

- (1) Interfering with the inquiry of some agent, A
- (2) Without consulting A
- (3) In order to epistemically benefit A.⁴

I see information control – i.e. withholding information from people, or making them attend to information they don't yet have – to be one straightforward way of interfering with people's inquiry. The problems I will be exploring all tie into the non-consultation part of our definition. I want to illuminate a cluster of challenges that arise in attempts to non-consultatively bestow epistemic benefits on others.

One key assumption I am making, in explaining these problems, is that beliefs must be of some interest to their recipient in order for their acquisition to be epistemically beneficial. In this assumption I'm following the two most prominent defenders of epistemic paternalism, Goldman and Ahlstrom-Vij, who both think the epistemic benefit of an agent gaining a true belief depends on the extent to which she is interested in it. It is "a function of whether the... agent is interested in the questions to which the belief pertains" (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013: 53; see also Goldman 2000: 321). A certain kind of epistemological purist might balk at this assumption. But for most of us it accords with our intuitions about the nature of epistemic value.⁵

By itself this assumption doesn't create a huge problem for defenders of epistemic paternalism. There are lots of cases where you have a good sense of what a person is interested in, and where you can see whether the epistemic goods you're trying to bestow tie into the recipient's interests in such a way as to constitute a benefit. Suppose you overhear someone at the library saying she's there to look for books on the Vietnam War, a topic which she says she's previously only learned about in dribs and drabs. You happen to be standing by the shelf that houses the library's small collection on the Vietnam War. You are well-read on the topic, and you notice a book there which is a less reliable source than all the others. It misrepresents unsourced anecdotes as hard facts, and proposes a wildly tendentious interpretation of the historical record. Before the would-be reader gets to the shelves to start browsing, you remove this book from its spot, hiding it in your bag until she's come and gone.

⁴ This definition follows e.g. Ahlstrom-Vij (2013: 4), Bullock (2018: 434), and Croce (2018: 305).

⁵ There were 60,817 people at the MCG when the Melbourne Demons defeated the Adelaide Crows in the AFL's second qualifying final on September 5, 1998. Because these informational tidbits mean nothing to you, the reader, I haven't epistemically benefited you by conveying them, irrespective of their truth, accuracy, etc. That is the key intuition behind the assumption I am introducing here.

In this situation you may think of yourself as doing the inquirer a favor, by preventing her, as a novice, from unwittingly choosing a book that would have dis-served her pursuit of knowledge. But the example also clues us into the difficulties that come with trying to beneficently guide other people's inquiry via information control. Things seem fairly simple in the library case, because you know what knowledge the inquirer is trying to gain, and you're just helping her take more effective means to her ends. But often, including in cases just like this, people's inquisitive interests are open-ended. The aims of their inquiries evolve as those inquiries proceed. Someone starts out wanting to learn about the Vietnam War, but along the way she gets interested in something broader (e.g. cold war politics, south-east Asian history), or narrower (e.g. the culture of wartime Saigon, the battles that her father fought in), or something tangential (e.g. war photography, French colonial architecture).

Granted, not all inquiries are like this. Sometimes you want to know where your keys are, so you check your pocket and there they are. Or you ask your partner, and she says the keys are on the table, and that's that. But even in situations that involve off-the-cuff observational or conversational queries, as opposed to more planned-out sequences of investigative research, it's a common enough experience to inquire into P, only to find that the evidence that settles the question of whether P opens up further questions about Q and R, which you're just as interested in as you were in P – or indeed, which lead you to think that the real underlying reason why you were interested in P was because of P's connection to these further matters, Q and R.

The worry that's lurking, for the epistemic paternalist, is that if you aren't being consultative, it's hard to make a person's inquiry more successful, because the aims of her inquiry, and thus what would qualify as a success in it, evolve as the inquiry develops, in a way that the paternaliser isn't well-placed to keep track of. Whether you are epistemically benefiting someone depends on whether you're helping them gain interest-relevant beliefs, knowledge, or understanding. And even if you have a good initial sense of what your beneficiary is interested in, her interests will have nuances that surface as the inquiry proceeds, and which alter its aims. If you consult as you go, to get a more responsive understanding of the inquirer's interests, you can generally do a better job at helping her inquiry succeed. But then your intervention will be collaborative or lateral assistance, as opposed to a non-consultative interference.

In the library case hiding the dubious book *may* be epistemically beneficial. But you could also ask the inquirer more about what she's interested in. It may turn out that the book is, despite its failings, a good starting point for learning about some adjacent aspects of the Vietnam War that specially pique the inquirer's interest. In short, there are cases in which you will be more effective in your epistemic beneficence by being consultative, and thus tuned into the inquirer's dy-

namic curiosities, and indeed, where declining to consult with an intended beneficiary could be downright epistemically harmful. Far-reaching programs of epistemic paternalism seem questionable at least until we have a sense of how prevalent such cases are, in comparison to cases where the ‘agenda of inquiry’ is fixed in a way that nullifies the worry.

3. Norms of inquiry and finite brainpower

In the above I’m assuming that people are entitled to have their own interests, and hence that there is some amount of agent-relativity in judgements about the comparative interestingness of different inquiries. If we are asking “should A be interested in P?”, or “should A be more interested in P than Q?”, we will often need to know some things about A – her ideals, longer-term goals, personal fascinations, sense of identity, etc. – and how they all add up to a particular schedule of interests. Granted, we may think that what matters isn’t only people’s *active* interests, i.e. the interests they consciously recognise in themselves, but also the interests they would have if they were fully informed and reflective (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013: 55, Goldman 1999: 95). But this still leaves room for the type of agent-relativity I am adverting to. Permissible variations in people’s interests and curiosities aren’t entirely due to variations in how informed and reflective people are. A group of people who are similarly reflective and informed are still likely to have a great deal of diversity in their interests.

Even granting all this, one might think that informed, reflective people are obliged to be interested in certain things. And this gives rise to a natural reply to my points above about why the open-ended nature of people’s interests calls for a consultative approach to epistemic beneficence. Whatever agent-relativity applies to judgements about the interestingness of different questions, presumably the information controller is sometimes able to think “this person, A, *should* be interested in P, and so I’ll be benefiting A in helping them learn about P, regardless of whether they evince an active interest in P.” And consultation doesn’t always make sense in such cases. If A is actively interested in P, or ready to have an active interest awakened, then consultation is unnecessary. And if A is resistant to taking an active interest in P, then consultation may be counterproductive. “It will be better to help A learn about P on the sly”, so the paternalist may think “instead of raising the issue with her head-on.”

I don’t think this reasoning will get us to the conclusion that, for the epistemically beneficent actor, it is *in general* prudent to eschew consultation with a would-be beneficiary. For one thing, this rationale only applies in a narrow set of cases, i.e. those in which you’re sharing information related to things that the beneficiary is obliged to be interested in. But even in these cases there are complications in how we understand the relative weight and priority of putatively obligatory interests,

which create subtle obstacles for any attempt at non-consultative epistemic beneficence.

For example, suppose we think people should be interested in questions about the nature and effects of Covid-19. The issue is what level of priority should be assigned to that interest, given people's finite cognitive resources, and their presumptive entitlement to allocate some of those resources to other activities. An extreme view is that people should prioritise learning about Covid-19 over and above all other activities, including recreation, socializing, or anything else that isn't strictly necessary for survival. A very slightly more moderate view would be that people may spend some of their brainpower on things besides pursuing epistemic goods, but that with the part of their cognitive resources given over epistemic goods, finding out about Covid-19 should take priority over everything else. Both views seem totally implausible.

The somewhat plausible thesis that lies in the rough vicinity of these extreme views is that people should allocate some brainpower to pursuing epistemic aims, and should have learning about Covid-19 as one of their epistemic aims. Once we retreat to that position, though, it seems like there will be lots of wiggle room vis-à-vis what degree of priority a given agent should assign to learning about Covid-19, or any other topic they are obliged to have an interest in. Besides the fact that there are endless other topics to seek out new information on, there are also other types of epistemic 'work', besides seeking out new evidence and information, to which the agent may allocate some of her cognitive resources. One kind of work is keeping track of things that she already knows: reviewing her knowledge, recalling its evidentiary bases, and engaging in other sorts of mental exercises that recommit her knowledge to memory. Another kind of work is expanding her stock of knowledge not through seeking out new information, but by reflectively figuring out what further distinct and non-trivial pieces of knowledge might be inferable on the basis of her current stock of knowledge.

Jane Friedman's work on the norms of inquiry – what she calls *zetetic* norms – offers a rich analysis of the kinds of resource-allocation trade-offs that I'm pointing to here. One key idea Friedman wants to emphasise is that there is no obvious way to arbitrate between norms that tell you to acquire new information, as part of an inquiry, and norms that tell you to engage in reflections and inferences drawing on your current stock of knowledge. You have limited brainpower and time, and these two different classes of norms – while they are both ultimately aiming at the same sort of epistemic goods: true belief, knowledge, understanding – offer divergent prescriptions as to your resource-allocation at any given moment. To paraphrase Friedman

There is a lot that a subject, S, can do at some time, t, and this 'do' doesn't only range over bodily actions, like talking to people, or looking around, or searching online. It also ranges over mental actions like drawing inferences, making judgments, and searching memory. Let's say that A is the set of all the things S

is in a position to do at *t*. The strategic norms for inquiry are going to render a verdict about which acts in *A* *S* is allowed to do and which they are not allowed to do. If we assume that *S* should at least take *some* means for trying to answer their question, at *t*, then there may be many acts in *A* that *S* isn't permitted to do, at *t*, from the perspective of these strategic norms. This is because many of the things *S* can do at a given moment aren't going to be means to them answering their question. (Friedman 2020: 19-20, paraphrased)

In essence, the idea is that retaining and deepening your current stock of knowledge can get in the way of actively inquiring after new information, and *vice versa*. There is also another way that the two classes of norms can come into conflict, which relates to suspending judgement. Friedman convincingly argues that treating a proposition *P* as an object of inquiry requires you to suspend judgement about *P*. But then it seems like there are cases in which the available evidence justifies you in having a settled belief that *P*, but where it is also permissible to open an inquiry into whether *P*, on the off chance that the evidence is misleading, or liable to be outweighed by as-yet-unavailable evidence indicating *P*'s falsity. In cases like these, the zetetic norms and doxastic epistemic norms generate different prescriptions. One calls for you to believe *P*, while the other permits you to suspend judgment about *P* (Ibid: 8-12).⁶

These aren't just meant to be abstruse technical claims about the structure of epistemic norms. These kinds of tensions and trade-offs are a pervasive feature of our epistemic lives. Most of us have forgotten a huge amount of things we once knew. And for just about all of us, the story of this forgetting is partly a story about opting to prioritise the acquisition of new information over retention and reflective deepening of what we already knew. When we decide to undertake some inquiry, we suspend judgement about various propositions (some of which we may have formerly held as settled beliefs), and we allocate some of our finite cognitive resources towards the acquisition of new information (that illuminates the truth of those propositions), and away from any number of other cognitive tasks that would serve some other part of our all-things-considered epistemic aims, via some other sort of epistemic work.

There are cases in which it seems obvious that an agent is negotiating these trade-offs badly. If you lose track of important knowledge because you get swept up in

⁶ For discussion of Friedman's claims about inquiry and suspension of judgement, see (2017). For discussion of her claims about the divergent prescriptions of zetetic norms and other (doxastic) epistemic norms, see (2020a) and (2020b). Much of the work in Friedman's analysis is about showing how zetetic norms, i.e. norms that tell you how to practically carry out a successful inquiry, can/should be thought of as members of the overarching class epistemic norms, as opposed to being norms of practical, means-end reasoning. Her reasoning on this is something like the following: doxastic epistemic norms – norms like: believe what your evidence shows – could either be seen as (i) norms of practical inquiry, or (ii) something else, something like pure commands of reason, to which we owe allegiance regardless of any practical payoffs. If (ii), then it's unclear why we should regard epistemic norms as binding upon us (2020b: 32). But we *do* regard such norms as being binding upon us. So this pushes us towards (i), in which case zetetic norms and doxastic norms by definition belong to the same general class of norms.

learning about pointless trivia, you're managing things badly. If you fail to learn about something you really need to learn about, because you decided to re-read a book of facts that you already memorized (just to further reinforce your memory), you're managing things badly. But most of the time it isn't obvious what epistemic conscientiousness *per se* calls for, in negotiating these trade-offs.⁷ And so, again, agent-relative factors seem to have a bearing on our judgements about this. If a person has a burning appetite for a particular inquiry, that's a good reason for her to allocate some of her cognitive resources to the acquisition of information relevant to that inquiry. If another person is disposed to retain and reflectively deepen her knowledge of a certain topic, rather than pursuing new inquiries, that is a good reason for her to allocate her finite cognitive resources accordingly. The underlying reasoning here is just simple, run-of-the-mill epistemic consequentialism. 'Outward' investigation and 'inward ratiocination' can both deliver epistemic goods, but more epistemic goods are likely to be realised if, at any given time, people are striking a balance, between investigation and ratiocination, that is responsive to their own temperamental leanings.

We are now in a position to see a further way in which attempts at epistemic paternalism can go awry, despite beneficent intentions. In §2 I argued that you can do better at assisting someone's inquiry by being consultative, and thus attuned to the inquirer's dynamic interests. But epistemic beneficence also calls for you to help the inquirer to strike a balance between investigation and ratiocination that is optimal in their attainment of epistemic goods. And this factor also speaks in favor of a consultative approach, insofar as the inquirer herself is typically better-placed to interpret her own temperamental leanings, and in light of these to decide whether more or less active inquiry is likely to be helpful for her in attaining epistemic goods.

Information control isn't only a way of guiding inquiry that is already underway. It can also be a way of instigating or terminating inquiry. Placing some information under a person's nose, without asking them if they're interested, is a way of nudging them towards an inquiry that makes use of that information. Removing information from someone's reach, without first checking with them, is a way of nudging someone away from inquiry that makes use of that information. Information controllers affect how the balance between inquiry and ratiocination is struck, for those agents whose information they are controlling. If you consult as you go, you can help strike a better balance on this front, by being sensitive to the agent's own temperamental inclinations, and thus you can generally do a better job at helping the inquirer to attain epistemic goods. But again, your beneficent intervention in that case will be a collaborative form of assistance, not a top-down, non-consultative interference.

⁷ It isn't obvious because there seem to be different ways of attaining epistemic goods, and it isn't obvious which of these ways, in a given set of circumstances, is the most effective means to that end.

4. Student-led learning

This picture of consultative epistemic beneficence that I am sketching will resonate with those who teach, and who take pedagogy seriously. Of course in most teaching situations some learning outcomes are decided upon in advance, and to that extent are not led by students' interests or temperaments. But good teachers look for ways to tap into students' interests and temperaments in trying to bring about learning outcomes. They let students focus on what fascinates and excites them within the syllabus. They allow lines of inquiry to open up in a way that's student-led, even if that sometimes means digressing, or jumping ahead a little, or going right back to basics. ("There are no stupid questions.") And they allow other lines of inquiry to trail off if students aren't latching on in the right way. Some teachers may have an ethical story to tell about these pedagogical practices. They may say that having an adaptable, student-led approach to teaching is about respect, fairness, or promoting welfare. But these practices can be defended on purely epistemic grounds. You can favor a student-led approach to teaching precisely because you want your teaching to effectively promote the epistemic good, and you think this approach is the best way to do so.

This picture stands in striking contrast to how education is portrayed by proponents of epistemic paternalism. What they portray is something more like what Paolo Freire, in his classic work on education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), characterizes as a 'banking' model of education. Educators use their expertise to override students' neophytic attitudes about what it's worth being interested in, and what it's worth paying attention to in order to learn about those interests. As an example of this, when Goldman speaks of the exclusion of indefensible views from a curriculum, he uses health education classes as an example. Health classes "do not give equal time to drug pushers to defend the safety of drug use", he says, "or to quacks to present and defend their cures." And such omissions, he suggests, have veritistically good consequences (1991: 121). Goldman thus regards information control in education as one of the well-established social practices that conflicts with a principle that would prohibit information control by epistemic authorities (Ibid: 114). Picking up on the same subject, Ahlstrom-Vij considers an extension of this sort of rationale.

We may even imagine that teachers could justifiably withhold true and perfectly accurate theories, on the grounds that those theories... have a tendency to confuse the students, and have them draw the wrong conclusions.

His thought here is that there is a great deal of complexity in explaining how much of a health risk different drugs pose, given facts about addictiveness, dosage strength, etc., and moreover, that some legal drugs, like alcohol, or over-the-counter medication, can potentially have worse health effects than some illegal drugs. And so:

A completely accurate account of the risks and benefits of drugs would have to be fairly complex, on account of having to make several distinctions and qualifications... such an account may also be more likely to lead students to draw inaccurate conclusions than a less sophisticated... account, such as one on which it is maintained, say, that all drugs are bad. (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013: 31)

As Ahlstrom-Vij rightly goes on to say, it is an empirical question whether suppressing information and espousing simplified – and strictly speaking, false – summaries will result in better epistemic outcomes for students. I don't pretend to have an overview of the data, but it strikes me that advocates of more transparent, consultative, student-led pedagogy might well want to cite drug education as a prime example of the folly of information control in teaching. Who knows how many false beliefs about the health risks of marijuana, alcohol, and prescription pain-killers are a result of paternalistically mis- or under-informative drug education programs, which simplistically portray one of these as an unsafe drug, and the other two as presumptively safe refreshments/medicine? However beneficent one's underlying motives might be, any responsible educator needs to reckon with the possibility that suppressing the facts or propounding half-truths can lead to totally dire veritistic outcomes.

More to the point for our purposes, though, education that isn't responsive to students' interests and temperaments seems to run a serious risk of failing to properly engage the student's mind. Ahlstrom-Vij seems to me too sanguine about this.

Many of us have at one point or another in the course of our schooling felt that we are being taught thoroughly uninteresting and irrelevant things. But as we look back years later with more informed eyes, we see that in many cases we were actually being taught things that are relevant and interesting, although we were not able to see this at the time. (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013: 55)

Many people do have such an experience. But we can't infer much from this until we consider the informative comparisons. First, in the wake of paternalistic educational experiences, how common is retrospective appreciation, like what Ahlstrom-Vij describes, compared to retrospective frustration, which, with the benefit of hindsight, sees the preoccupations of one's education as being just as pointless as they seemed at the time? Second, do we find greater retrospective appreciation about the topical preoccupations of one's education in the wake of paternalistic educational experiences, or do we see more of this appreciation in the wake of less paternalistic, more student-led education? These are empirical questions. But for purposes of hypothesis selection, it's notable that in pretty much all mainstream storytelling about education, from *Hard Times* to *Mona Lisa Smile*, rigidity about the syllabus is portrayed as a mark of pedagogical incompetence,

while adaptability and sensitivity to students' individual interests and temperaments is portrayed as the mark of a true teacher.⁸

I am only trying to make a modest point here. I'm not sure whether we can use arguments about the veritistic merits of different educational philosophies to draw far-reaching conclusions about the general justifiability of non-consultative information control. I'm really just trying to problematise the appeal to education, as a supposedly congenial example and reference point for advocates of information control. It's true that part of what occurs in education is that epistemic authorities decide on behalf of others what they should and shouldn't pay attention to. But this cannot be seen as lending support to the idea that non-consultative information control is a reliable, tried-and-tested way for authorities to do their work. Why? Because the authorities-deciding-what-students-pay-attention-to part of educational practice is necessarily married up with another part of education, which is about figuring out how to let the contents of a syllabus take hold in students' minds. And it's doubtful that a non-consultative approach is the optimal one vis-à-vis this other part of educational practice. This other area of education is all about being sensitive to the interests and temperaments of students, and working together with students to figure out when and where new inquiries should take off, and where, instead, energy should be spent on retention and reflective deepening of what has already been learned.⁹

5. Epistemic autonomy and foreign wills

Let's take stock. Conferring epistemic benefits on a person is easy in some cases. Tell her something you know, that she doesn't, and you've imparted a bit of knowledge. But conferring epistemic benefits via non-consultative information control is harder. In order to do it effectively you need to have a good understanding of what informational provisions will, at the point of intervention, best conduce to the inquirer gaining true beliefs etc. And this depends on facts about the inquirer's state of mind that aren't readily ascertainable without consultation.

⁸ Croce (2018) argues that we should distinguish between experts, i.e. skilled researchers who are good at finding out truths in their field, and epistemic authorities, i.e. people who have novice-oriented abilities related to transmitting knowledge and understanding of truths in a given field. The contrast between rigidity and flexibility that I am alluding to may broadly map onto this distinction. Experts may tend towards rigidity in their syllabus design, based on what content their research abilities suggest is most important. By contrast, virtuous epistemic authorities may be more flexible, since they have a novice-oriented sensitivity to the content that is most effective at being taken in by learners.

⁹ None of this is meant to deny that educators should be free to design syllabuses as they see fit, based on their subject-relevant expertise. My point is that educators will be more effective in their role if they're displaying novice-oriented sensitivities, to borrow Croce's language (see note 8). The argument for strict principles of academic freedom isn't that educators can be trusted to always get things right on these fronts. The argument is that allowing other actors – administrators, business leaders, state officials – to interfere with academic judgements about course and syllabus content is likely to make things worse on these fronts. Principles of academic freedom stand guard against this (see Simpson 2020).

What are her interests? How are they evolving, or liable to evolve, in the course of an inquiry? Will she make greater epistemic gains by taking on new information at the moment, or by working on retention and reflective deepening of things she's already learned? If you want to epistemically benefit someone then you should consult with them to get a better understanding of such matters. This is what skilled teachers do by making their teaching practice student-led in various ways. As a would-be epistemic benefactor, you should only eschew consultation with a beneficiary if you think consultation is likely to totally derail her learning, e.g. if she has an appetite for misleading information, which consultation is somehow going to fuel. But outside of such unusual cases, consultation with the inquirer looks like a key part of epistemically beneficent practice.¹⁰

This suggests a different way of thinking about epistemic autonomy than what we often find in debates around epistemic paternalism. Some commonly-cited definitions of epistemic autonomy unhelpfully conceive of it as a rather eccentric state of being – something like a total unwillingness to learn from or with the help of others.¹¹ Of course epistemic autonomy thus defined gives us little reason to refrain from information control, because on this definition no-one has much epistemic autonomy, and few of us would really want it.¹² The fact that we all learn things from and with others should just be taken as part of the descriptive scenery that forms the backdrop against which theorizing about the nature of epistemic autonomy occurs. Being epistemically autonomous cannot, in light of this, be about being *disconnected* from others in one's epistemic life. It must be about being connected to others in the right ways – ways that facilitate learning, not indoctrination or excessive deference.¹³ Being able to conduct inquiry in a way that's

¹⁰ Is it possible to get information about the inquirer's interests and temperament, with a view to assisting in their inquiry, but without consulting the inquirer? Presumably yes, at least in some cases. My contention isn't that effective, epistemically beneficent intervention in someone else's inquiry is impossible without consultation. My claim is that in general consultative epistemic assistance is more effective than non-consultative epistemic paternalism, in benefiting the inquirer in the attainment of epistemic goods. Thanks to Neil Levy for pressing me on this point.

¹¹ For example, on Fricker's (2006: 225) widely-cited definition, the epistemically autonomous person "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".

¹² Granted, as Dellsén (2020) argues, there are good reasons for aspiring experts in some domain to seek a high degree of independence in their judgements within that domain. Among other things, this has the benefit of making the joint testimony of experts in that domain more reliable than if the experts were to evince a more conventional pattern of deference to their intellectual peers. However, even experts who are loath to defer to anyone else in their judgements will still, on pain of falling into a state of total informational poverty, need to rely on others when it comes to gathering information.

¹³ My point here mirrors the insight behind so-called relational theories of autonomy. Some theories of autonomy downplay the ways in which everybody's capacities for self-governance are formed and exercised in a thoroughly socially-embedded set of circumstances. Relational theories try to theorise autonomy in a way that remains consistently attuned to that fact. The inescapability of our social-embeddedness doesn't mean that self-governance is impossible. Autonomy-talk is a way of marking the important differences between people whose preferences are formed under the yoke of oppressive socialisation, and those whose preferences aren't, distorted by such factors; see e.g. Oshana (1998).

guided by one's own interests and temperamental leanings (*vis-à-vis* the trade-off between investigation and ratiocination), and, correspondingly, being free from the interference of foreign wills in respect of these things,¹⁴ is one significant aspect of epistemic autonomy, properly understood.¹⁵

Epistemic autonomy thus conceived of needn't be taken as a deontic side-constraint on the pursuit of epistemic goods. It isn't that you should temper your pursuit of epistemic goods out of respect for people's epistemic autonomy. The idea, rather, is that you should respect epistemic autonomy because this is how the effective pursuit of epistemic goods works for beings like us. In the introduction to this volume, Matheson and Loughheed ask whether it is better for someone to be autonomous in their attainment of epistemic goods. The answer suggested by my account isn't that it's *better* for people to attain epistemic goods autonomously, but that people are more likely to attain epistemic goods when their autonomy is respected.

On one level this flies in the face of the empirical findings that drive defences of epistemic paternalism. We know that inquirers make all sorts of errors if left to their own devices. In an unregulated informational environment some people will gravitate towards sources that are utterly inimical to the attainment of epistemic goods, for the inquirer and others. This is a crucial part of what motivates the notion that people need to be helped in conducting their inquiries.¹⁶ But to say that people need help isn't to say people's autonomy needs to be overridden. Co-operative, autonomy-respecting assistance to someone's inquiry is a veritistically desirable middle-ground between leaving a person to inquire alone, and paternalistically taking over her inquiry. The beneficent inquiry-assistant can let the inquirer's interests and temperament direct the course of the inquiry, while sharing her expertise in a way that helps with the attainment of the inquirer's aims. The argument for approaching things like this is that the inquiry is better for being approached in an autonomy-respecting way, precisely because it is thereby more effective at realizing the sought-after goods.

¹⁴ I mean to use the term *foreign will* in the way that Garnett uses it, in his account of what he calls social autonomy. For Garnett, if A would endorse (or at least not reject) B's will, then B's will isn't foreign to A, or to A's purposes (2015: 101). This concept then plugs into a view of autonomy, for him, on which "part of what it is for one's life to go well is for one to enjoy a certain kind of independence from the control or manipulation of others", and hence on which "the extent to which one is subject to foreign wills, one is deficient with respect to an important human value" (Garnett 2015: 99).

¹⁵ Godden (2020) argues that epistemic autonomy is about believing in accordance with the norms of belief, and that autonomous inquirers thus have reason to submit to paternalistic interventions in cases where this will help them conform to the norms of belief. Part of what we learn from Friedman's work on zetetic norms, however, is that norms of belief and norms of inquiry can push us in different directions, and while both sets of norms aim at the realisation of epistemic goods, it is often unclear which norms prescribe the most efficient route to that goal at a given moment. In such cases it is harder to see what epistemic-norm-conforming activity *per se* consists in, and hence it's less clear whether and when an autonomous and epistemically conscientious inquirer should welcome paternalistic intervention.

¹⁶ Chapter 1 of Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) provides a compelling explanation of this motivation.

Most people who want to become chess grandmasters need help from a coach. The aspiring grandmaster will need to extend her knowledge of opening theory. She will also need to learn more endgame theory. In any given coaching session, her coach could focus on opening theory or on endgame theory. Or, if the trainee isn't in a good headspace for taking in new information, her coach might give her activities – playing through classic games, solving puzzles – aimed at bedding down her current knowledge. If the aspiring grandmaster is smart she will welcome her coach's guidance about what to work on when. Her coach has a wider range of knowledge about how to get where she's trying to go. But the trainee shouldn't automatically defer to her coach's advice, and her coach shouldn't pressure her to do so. Sometimes the trainee will know best where epistemic gains are in the offing, based on her state of mind on a given day, and what's sparking her interest. The beneficent coach can try to bully or cajole the trainee into doing exactly what he wants to prescribe, in each session, or he can act as a collaborative consultant offering expert insight. Both approaches recognise that the trainee needs outside help. But the latter approach – the one I am recommending – is premised on the idea that help can be more effectively rendered, in general, if the recipient is able to guide the direction of her learning, and if her knowledge of her state of mind is self-consciously factored into this.

6. Conclusion

The most comprehensive defence of epistemic paternalism, from Ahlstrom-Vij, has a built-in response to the kinds of worries I have been presenting here. One of his conditions for justified epistemic paternalism is a burden-of-proof constraint: you need to think it's likely that everyone interfered with will indeed be epistemically benefited, thanks to your interference, or else it isn't justified (2013: 118). If it turns out that it's extremely hard to benefit people via non-consultative information control, given the kinds of issues I am highlighting, then this account already tells us to proceed carefully, and only use such measures when we're confident they will work.

As I said at the outset, the justifiability of epistemic paternalism in specific situations isn't in doubt. The burden-of-proof condition is a sensible caveat on how we extend the logic of those situations to other cases. I'm not attacking epistemic paternalism, then, so much as trying to keep it in its place. We should think more about the wider repertoire of non-paternalistic approaches that can be used by epistemic authorities trying to make positive social-epistemic interventions. We want to promote true belief in relation to controversies in public health, climate science, and other high-stakes issues. And we know that a *laissez-faire* approach – hoping that truth will win out, in some kind of Millian marketplace – is a vain hope in a world that has accepted global media empires and social network companies as its information-brokers (if indeed it was ever anything more than a vain

hope). The question, for anyone engaged in the kind of ameliorative social epistemology that debates about epistemic paternalism are situated within, is which methods are most likely to do the most good, once we eschew *laissez-faire* optimism and start proactively intervening.

My view is that we should be cautious about using information control in legal fact-finding as a model for epistemically beneficent action more generally, and that we would do well, instead, to seek inspiration from student-led learning practices. The immediate practical obstacle with this, though, is in how we offer consultative input to people we are hoping to educate, guide, and de-indoctrinate, in relation to issues like climate change. These people aren't just sitting in a classroom somewhere, waiting to embark on a voyage of epistemic self-improvement aided by a beneficent expert. We can't go through the whole online world, one social media-user at a time, in order to find out about everyone's interests and temperaments, and then use this information to provide individualized epistemic assistance to those we are trying to epistemically benefit. Nevertheless, there are still ways of consulting with potential epistemic beneficiaries. We can do more to try to understand the interests and temperaments of the kinds of people who characteristically fall prey to misinformation, conspiracy theories, and the like. Instead of thinking: "these people can't be trusted to reason intelligently, so we had better control the information they have access to", we could do more work to understand what these epistemically disenfranchised people are looking for, in making sense of the world, and how to package the information we are hoping they will take on in a way that meets them half-way.

No doubt that will strike some readers as wildly optimistic. Perhaps it is. The main take-away here is just that promoting the good epistemic outcomes we are aiming for through methods of information control isn't a magic bullet that's going to ameliorate our social epistemic problems. And this is because really effective epistemically beneficent interventions need to take account the interests and temperaments of the would-be beneficiaries. Non-consultative information control doesn't do this.¹⁷

¹⁷ Many thanks to Neil Levy, Kirk Lougheed, and Jon Matheson for feedback and constructive criticism on an earlier version of this chapter.

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