

Epistemic Paternalism and the Service Conception of Epistemic Authority

Abstract

Epistemic paternalism (henceforth, EP) is the thesis that in some circumstances we are epistemically justified in interfering with the inquiry of another for her own epistemic good without consulting her on the issue (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013, Bullock 2016, Goldman 1991). EP distinguishes from paternalism broadly conceived in virtue of the kind of good it assures to achieve – namely, an *epistemic* good – and of the kind of justification it requires – namely, *epistemic* justification. EP has always been regarded as a potentially harmful epistemic practice, which could undermine our freedom and epistemic autonomy. However, Ahlstrom-Vij (2013) and Pritchard (2013) argue that there are genuinely defensible forms of EP and explore the epistemic goods that paternalistic practices would allow the unaware “victims” to achieve. Surprisingly enough, not much work has been done on the question of *who* is epistemically entitled to implement paternalistic practices – and in virtue of which features one has this entitlement.

In this paper, I aim to provide a compelling answer to this question. In particular, I endorse the thesis that a subject A is epistemically entitled to implement paternalistic practices towards a subject S only if A is an *epistemic authority* (henceforth, EA) for S. Consequently, a compelling theory of epistemic authority ought to make room for EP among the rational practices that EA can adopt toward S. In order to support this thesis, I first develop a pluralistic conception of EA. Then, I show how paternalistic practices fits the account and explain why those who fail to satisfy the conditions for being EAs – i.e. our epistemic peers – are not entitled to establish paternalistic practices toward us.

Zagzebski (2012) and Jaeger (2015) agree that a subject A is an EA for a subject S insofar as:

- (i) A is more conscientious than S, i.e. A uses her faculties better than S does for obtaining the truth; and
- (ii) A does something in the service of S.

Yet, they take opposing stances on

- (ii*) what epistemic goods A provides S with; and
- (ii**) what rational strategies A can adopt to do something in the service of S.

According to Zagzebski's *pre-emptive account of the authority of belief* (PAAB), EA's service is that of providing S with *true beliefs*. This service is epistemically rational insofar as EA's testimony that p offers S a *pre-emptive reason* for believing that p – i.e. a reason that replaces S's other reasons for believing that p and that S is epistemically compelled to adopt. In contrast, Jaeger endorses a *weighing account of the authority of understanding* (WAAU), according to which EA's service is that of fostering S's understanding. He rejects the notion of pre-emptive reasons and holds that EA provides S with *weighing reasons* – i.e. reasons that S adds to her own balance of reasons when S is reflecting on whether p is the case.

My pluralistic service conception of authority (PSCA) goes beyond the dichotomy between PAAB and WAAU. As for (ii*), I argue that some subjects are authorities of belief, while others are authorities of understanding, depending on (a) S's epistemic needs and on (b) A's intellectual virtues. As for (ii**), I conditionalize the rationality of pre-empting upon particular circumstances and, following Boyd (2015), I argue that it is possible to pre-empt understanding. Thus, on PSCA authorities of belief and authorities of understanding can provide S with both weighing reasons and pre-emptive reasons.

Unlike Zagzebski's PAAB and Jaeger's WAAU, PSCA explains why EA's implementing paternalistic practices toward S can be epistemically rational. For what concerns (i), if A were not more conscientious than S is, the fact that S achieves an epistemic good through EP would be due to luck; hence, EP would be irrational on each of the three accounts. For what concerns (ii*), Pritchard (2013) illustrated that EP allows S both to gain true beliefs (and avoid false ones) and to acquire understanding. Thus, neither PAAB nor WAAU can make room for EP, as their answer to (ii*) is restricted to either of the epistemic goals under

consideration. In contrast, PSCA easily accommodates EP in virtue of its pluralistic view on what A can do in the service of S. For what concerns (iii**), paternalistic practices are irrational on Jaeger's WAAU, according to which the only rational strategy that A can adopt without violating S's epistemic autonomy is providing S with weighing reasons. In contrast, PSCA can be broadened in such a way that if A is an EA for S, it can be rational for A to interfere with S's inquiry without consulting S in particular circumstances. In conclusion, I show that my thesis that only EAs can implement paternalistic practices is compatible with Ahlstrom-Vij's and Pritchard's accounts of EP.

References

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