

EPISTEMIC PATERNALISM AND THE SERVICE CONCEPTION OF EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

MICHEL CROCE

*University of Edinburgh*

[penultimate version]

ABSTRACT. Epistemic paternalism is the thesis that in some circumstances we are justified in interfering with the inquiry of another for their own epistemic good without consulting them on the issue. In this paper, I address the issue of who is rationally entitled to undertake paternalistic interferences, and in virtue of which features one has this entitlement. First, I undermine the view according to which experts are the most apt people to act as paternalist interferers. Then, I argue that epistemic authorities are in a better position to satisfy the requirements of justified epistemic paternalism, when conceived according to the service model of epistemic authority. Finally, I offer a virtue-based account of paternalist interferers and show how it can apply to cases in which the interferer is a group or an institution.

KEYWORDS: paternalism; epistemic authority; expertise; group epistemology.

§1 INTRODUCTION

Suppose a mother enrolls her son in university and pays for the tuition fees while he is working to save money and is unsure whether to keep studying. Almost everyone would agree that she is acting paternalistically towards him. Some would argue that her interference is permissible; others would disagree. In this paper, I am interested in the specific phenomenon epistemologists call *epistemic paternalism*, according to which in some circumstances we are justified in interfering with the inquiry of another for their own epistemic good without consulting them on the issue (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013, 4). For now, let us consider the example above as a case of an epistemically paternalistic interference. Other examples may include a judge withholding information from the jurors about the track record of crimes committed by the defendant in order to preclude them from developing a bias against him; and a health department mandating the introduction of prediction models for medical diagnosis and prognosis in order to prevent clinicians from overestimating their expertise and clinical abilities.

Epistemic paternalism (henceforth, EP) is commonly regarded as a harmful epistemic practice that could undermine our freedom, epistemic autonomy, or both. However, in the last three decades, a few epistemologists have endorsed the view that there are both genuinely defensible forms of EP and epistemic goods that paternalistic interferences could allow the subjects interfered with to gain (see §2, Ahlstrom-Vij 2013; Bullock 2016; Goldman 1991; and Pritchard 2013). Surprisingly enough, not much work has been done on the question of who is rationally entitled to undertake paternalistic practices, and in virtue of which features one has this entitlement.

I aim to provide a compelling answer to this question. In particular, I will challenge Goldman’s view, according to which one’s paternalistic interference is justified insofar as the interfering subject is an *expert*. I shall argue that the epistemic conditions for being a paternalist interferer substantially differ from the requirements of cognitive expertise (§3). Specifically, they differ in a way that makes Goldman’s own definition of an expert inadequate to justify epistemically paternalistic interferences, as paternalist interferers have a different task to accomplish from experts and therefore are required to display a different set of intellectual virtues. I shall also argue that *epistemic authorities*—which I take to differ from experts in a relevant sense (§4)—cannot fulfil the function of paternalist interferers. Yet I will show that experts and epistemic authorities have some relevant features in common. In §5, I will offer what I consider a compelling account of virtuous paternalist interferers, while in §6 I shall defend the idea that my account can apply to cases in which paternalist interferers are collectives, such as groups or institutions.

My argumentative strategy is grounded in a virtue-based framework, which—as I have argued elsewhere (see Croce 2017)—provides an extremely effective tool for distinguishing various ways in which a subject can be epistemically superior to another. For this reason, this paper contributes to showing how virtue theory contributes to the current epistemological research by providing insights into an underexplored topic in social epistemology. Some might feel disappointed about the scope of the project in that it does not purport to provide a conclusive straightforward answer to whether EP, in general, is an epistemically justified practice. That remains a fair question, one still open for debate. Research on epistemic paternalism could nonetheless benefit from the results of this project. Were my argument to be compelling, it would provide an effective corrective to a potentially wrong research line according to which only experts should be granted the entitlement to paternalistically interfere with someone’s inquiry. It would also allow us to identify another type of authoritative subject in the epistemic realm, one that should not be confused with cognitive experts and epistemic authorities.

## §2 EPISTEMIC PATERNALISM IN A NUTSHELL

In Alvin Goldman’s early formulation (1991, 118–19), epistemic paternalism has two fundamental features. First, it is a form of *protection* that a subject (or a group) A, who is more reliable than a subject (or a group) B, exerts on B to improve the effectiveness of their epistemic agency, either by putting B in the conditions to acquire an epistemic good or by preventing B from developing various forms of epistemic deficiencies (e.g., cognitive biases, unjustified beliefs, or inappropriate heuristic reasoning). Second, EP involves A’s *interposition* with B’s agency to the extent that B lacks the opportunity to exercise their own judgment in the way they think to be most appropriate.

Both components of Goldman’s view of EP are featured in Ahlstrom-Vij’s recent account (2013), according to which A undertakes an epistemically paternalistic practice towards B by doing (or omitting to do) X if and only if the following conditions are met:

- (a) Doing X interferes with the epistemic autonomy or freedom of B to conduct inquiry in whatever way they see fit (*interference condition*);
- (b) A does so without consulting B on whether B should be interfered with in the relevant manner (*non-consultation condition*); and
- (c) A does so for the purpose of making B epistemically better off (*improvement condition*).

Let us consider in detail these three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an interference to be epistemically paternalistic. The interference condition captures Goldman’s point on A’s interposition with B’s agency. Assuming an involuntaristic framework, according to which we cannot believe things on command, interfering with one’s epistemic agency, particularly with one’s inquiry,<sup>1</sup> amounts to compromising one’s freedom to choose the most appropriate methods and strategies to perform some epistemic task and thus to attain an epistemic good. The jurors case mentioned above amounts to an example of an external constraint on information access in which jurors’ freedom to evaluate the case is compromised by the fact that the judge withholds relevant information in order to prevent them from becoming biased against the defendant. The prediction-model case features a constraint on information collection because it forces clinicians to collect some, and not other, information about patients and to ground their diagnosis on the results provided by the model. The mother case is an example of a slightly different sort of interference, in that her intervention affects her son’s freedom to decide how to deal with his academic and professional interests by making things easier for him to opt for studying.<sup>2</sup>

According to the non-consultation condition, for an interference to be (epistemically) paternalistic, A does not ask B whether B is happy with A’s interference. On Ahlstrom-Vij’s account, for the interference to be paternalistic it is not necessary that B would object to A’s interference, had they been consulted, nor that B would not welcome the interference itself. What matters instead is that A act irrespectively of what B might think about the interference—that is, that A does not ask for B’s opinion, or, in case A knows it, disregards what B wants.<sup>3</sup>

The improvement condition captures Goldman’s point on protection, yet it goes beyond that concept, for it explains that the scope of A’s interference is not merely that of protecting B from a potential epistemic harm. Rather, it aims at ensuring that B’s epistemic agency benefits from the interference. One plausible way to account for how a paternalistic interference can make one epistemically better off is to refer to the notion of epistemic value as conceived by Pritchard (2009, 2013), amongst others. His take on epistemic paternalism sheds light on a relevant weakness of Goldman’s and Ahlstrom-Vij’s perspectives, which measure the epistemic benefits and harms of a paternalistic interference in a purely veritistic way—that is, by considering the number of true beliefs that A allows B to acquire, or the number of false beliefs that A prevents B from acquiring (see 2013, 4). On a broader perspective, it sounds reasonable to concede that A’s interference can make B epistemically better off in at least two more ways. First, B might improve their understanding of some subject matter *x* or avoid worsening their understanding of *x* as a result of A’s interference. Second, B might acquire intellectual virtues or avoid forming epistemic vices because of A’s interference. Notice that the improvement condition constrains A’s purpose, rather than the outcome of A’s interference. Thus, as Ahlstrom-Vij points out, for an interference to count as epistemically paternalistic it is not necessary that A promote B’s well-being: A’s failure in improving B’s epistemic well-being might make the interference unjustified, but it does not affect its status as an epistemically paternalistic practice (2013, 49).

---

<sup>1</sup> On Ahlstrom-Vij’s view, inquiry cannot be reduced to belief formation; rather, it is something the subject does and whose purposes, methods, and activities “are selected specifically on account of their epistemic merits, that is, because of how they (as far as we can tell) tend to lead us towards true belief and away from false beliefs” (2013, 40).

<sup>2</sup> For further considerations on different kinds of constraints, see Bullock (2016, 2–3).

<sup>3</sup> Ryan (2016) makes a similar point about general paternalism when he suggests that Dworkin’s condition (2010)—according to which A’s interference is paternalistic insofar as A acts without the consent of B—be replaced with the requirement that A acts irrespectively of the consent of B.

If we take a quick look at the debate on general paternalism, it is easy to notice that all three requirements for epistemic paternalism might be questioned. Ryan (2016) would presumably reject the non-interference condition, as he contends that “an action may be paternalistic without interfering in the liberty or autonomy of the object of the paternalist action” (126). Feinberg (1986) might reject the non-consultation condition since he believes that a coercive rule legislated for someone’s sake and approved by the subjects interfered with is not paternalistic (20). And Dworkin (2017) would replace the improvement condition with a success-based condition, according to which A’s interference shall improve B’s welfare or promote B’s interest, values, or good. In what follows, I assume that Ahlstrom-Vij’s conditions can nonetheless be defended; I shall leave a more detailed discussion of these requirements for another time.

All I have said so far concerns the requirements for one’s interference with another’s agency to count as epistemically paternalistic. However, for an epistemically paternalistic interference to be justified, some story has to be told about how the interference comes to have the relevant beneficial effects it is meant to generate. That is a very complicated matter because it has to be shown not only that (i) an epistemically paternalistic interference is likely to promote the interfered-with subjects’ epistemic good, but also that (ii) it does not damage their overall welfare. The former requirement amounts to demonstrating that A must have a justified belief that their interference is likely to be beneficial for B. To account for this requirement, Ahlstrom-Vij introduces the *burden-of-proof condition*, which demands that “the would-be interferers are able to make a case that available evidence suggests that it is *highly likely* that everyone does or will benefit from the relevant form of interference, compared to relevant alternatives” (2013, 122). The latter requirement amounts to showing that the epistemic reasons for interfering do not clash with other relevant epistemic or non-epistemic reasons against intervention.

For the sake of argument, let us grant that (i) is fairly unproblematic, and focus on (ii). The first problem with this requirement is that any interference seems to violate at least the interfered-with subject’s own autonomy or personal sovereignty. Some would presumably argue that such a violation might constitute a sufficient reason not to undertake any form of epistemically paternalistic interference. Yet there are ways to resist this objection. According to Bullock, the proponent of EP might respond that personal sovereignty is only pro tanto valuable, as there might well be circumstances in which our reasons for interfering outweigh the concern for one’s autonomy (2016, 10). According to Pritchard (2013), EP need not clash with this legitimate concern, because a small violation of someone’s autonomy today might be justified by the fact that it leads to improving their freedom and autonomy in the longer term.

The second problem with (ii) pertains to finding a compelling way to cash out this requirement. Ahlstrom-Vij’s strategy amounts to introducing the *alignment condition*, according to which in order for an epistemically paternalistic interference to be justified, A’s epistemic reasons for the interference need to be aligned with A’s non-epistemic reasons for the interference by either constituting additional reasons for interfering or by being silent on the issue—that is, by not constituting reasons against interfering (2013, 117). This condition does not require—as rival options do<sup>4</sup>—that A knows the weight of the reasons to be balanced, but only their valence (their direction for or against a given interference). However, it presents a relevant weakness: as Ahlstrom-Vij admits, it does not constitute a stable necessary condition for justified epistemic paternalism, because there may be cases in

---

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Bullock’s balancing-goods condition (2016, 8).

which a weak non-epistemic reason against interfering fails to outweigh robust epistemic reasons for intervention.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these problems, Ahlstrom-Vij holds that the burden-of-proof condition and the alignment condition are jointly sufficient to justify epistemically paternalistic practices (114). It is important to notice that his justification of EP targets large-scale situations in which someone's interference is going to have an impact on a considerable number of subjects. This explains why in his view the notion of evidence on the likelihood of an interference's beneficial effects is to be conceived in terms of statistical probability. Nonetheless, it seems possible to justify paternalistic interferences even in the absence of such statistical evidence, or so I shall contend. In several ordinary circumstances, some interferences can help particular subjects (or groups) in virtue of their specific epistemic situation. Think, for example, of a parent hiding a joke history book, i.e. a book including unreliable information and jokes about historical events, from their kids (Pritchard 2013, 15); of a doctor breaking her patient's right not to know about his illness (Bullock 2016, 3), as she justifiably believes he will benefit from knowing that he is out of danger; or of a teacher refraining from providing a student with the tools to solve a geometry problem in order to let her develop analytical skills. What matters in circumstances like these is that the interferer be an epistemically competent subject who has the ability to form justified beliefs about the benefits of the relevant form of interference as well as about why that course of action is meant to be more beneficial than relevant alternatives.

In this picture, Ahlstrom-Vij's burden-of-proof condition becomes a special instance of a more general requirement—call it the *epistemic-reasons condition*—according to which interferers must have robust epistemic reasons for believing that the subject(s) interfered with will benefit from the intervention, compared to relevant alternatives. Those who fulfil the burden-of-proof condition are by definition satisfying the epistemic-reasons condition too, yet in several cases someone can fulfil the latter without being in a position to satisfy the former. In such circumstances, an interference is justified insofar as it fulfils the epistemic-reasons condition and the alignment condition. I shall argue that for a paternalist interferer to be justified in intervening in someone else's inquiry as required by these conditions, they need to be *virtuous* interferers (see §5).

### §3 JUSTIFYING EP: AGAINST THE EXPERTISE STRATEGY

In several passages of his work on EP, Goldman suggests that expertise is a fundamental component for defending epistemic paternalism and argues that “to justify any particular instance of such paternalism ... we must have grounds for taking the agent to be an expert” (1991, 128). This claim seems to suggest that in his view, expertise should be considered a necessary condition for one to be entitled to undertake epistemically paternalistic interferences towards another. However, if someone thinks that, by definition, experts fulfil the justification conditions of paternalistic interferences, cognitive expertise would become a sufficient requirement for justified EP. After introducing Goldman's account of a cognitive expert,<sup>6</sup> I shall argue that his notion of expertise is neither necessary nor sufficient for justifying epistemically paternalistic interferences.

---

<sup>5</sup> See also Bullock (2016, 9–10) on this point.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth I will refer to cognitive experts simply as “experts”. What Goldman means by the notion of *cognitive* or *intellectual expertise* is the expertise pertaining to an agent's propositional knowledge and understanding, whereas *practical* or *performative expertise* identifies the expertise pertaining to an agent's “competence at

Goldman has recently remarked that any definition of an expert should reflect their function within an epistemic community. Specifically, he contends that such definition should explain “what expertise *is* by reference to what experts can *do* for laypersons by means of their special knowledge or skill” (2016, 1). Thus, any account of expertise should not only provide a definition of an expert (definition requirement) but also explain how this definition fits the function of expertise assumed by its proponent (function requirement). The definition of an expert on Goldman’s 1991 account can be summarized as follows:

EXPERT. A subject S is an expert in a domain D iff  
 [T-LC] S has true answers to core questions in D; or  
 [AC] S has the capacity to acquire true answers to core questions arising in D.

The former requirement is a *truth-linked condition* highlighting the veritistic flavour of Goldman’s definition, in that it measures expertise based on the number of true beliefs an expert possesses about the main issues in D. The latter is an *ability condition* that allows us to also consider experts those who have the ability to solve new problems arising within D, no matter whether they actually have done so. Thus, in this account, experts are supposed to perform what I call a *research-oriented function*, according to which S is an expert in domain D iff

[R-OF] S has the capacity to contribute to the epistemic progress of D. S can provide such help by offering true answers to the questions under dispute in D.

Now, let us go back to the conditions for justified EP in light of this account of an expert. Someone, if not Goldman himself, might want to hold the view that experts satisfy the burden-of-proof condition. It could be argued that a subject A, in virtue of their expertise, is the best candidate to evaluate available evidence in D and make a case that their interference with B is highly likely to make B epistemically better off. In fact, it is plausible to contend that experts know much better than laypeople how to assess pros and cons of a given course of action in their domain of expertise in light of relevant alternative practices. Similarly, one might hold that experts are also better placed to evaluate potential non-epistemic reasons against intervention, thereby being in a position to satisfy the alignment condition.

On careful analysis, though, it is far from clear that Goldman’s account of an expert can accommodate the requirements for justified EP. Let us focus on whether one’s expertise is *sufficient* for them to be justified in undertaking epistemically paternalistic interferences. Consider the following example:

PROF. EVERYT SOLVED. Suppose Joseph is a young mathematician based at MIT who is working at Hilbert’s problem n.3. Joseph knows that this specific problem has already been solved and knows its solution. His supervisor, Prof. Everyt Solved, is not only one of the most important mathematicians who worked at Hilbert’s problems but is also well known for her distraction and insensitivity to others’ epistemic needs. During a meeting with Joseph, Everyt suggests that Joseph try to work at problem n.3 from the beginning, as if it were still unsolved, in order to understand fully its structure and solution. A week later, she stops by Joseph’s

---

performing a task” (Watson 2016, 2), such as playing piano, doing magic tricks, or driving a truck, and involves an agent’s skills and know-how.

desk and, once she notices he is working on the problem, she tells him straight away the solution to the problem without allowing him to say a word.

I argue that this case satisfies the three conditions for an interference to count as epistemically paternalistic. Everyt's intervention fulfils the interference condition in that she limits Joseph's autonomy to conduct inquiry into Hilbert's problem n.3 in whatever way he sees fit. It also fulfils the non-consultation condition because she neither takes into consideration Joseph's opinion regarding her intervention nor consults him on the issue. Finally, it fulfils the improvement condition: due to her distraction and insensitivity to Joseph's needs, Everyt forgot the advice she gave to Joseph and now she genuinely interferes to help him by offering the solution to the problem. I also maintain that Everyt satisfies Goldman's expertise requirement: she not only has lots of true answers to the core questions in mathematics, but she also possesses the ability to contribute to the epistemic progress of the discipline, as her outstanding list of recent and forthcoming publications shows.

Nonetheless, Everyt's intervention does not constitute a justified case of epistemically paternalistic interference. Her complete insensitivity to the student's epistemic needs prevents her from being in a position to satisfy the epistemic-reasons condition. As a matter of fact, she might possess epistemic reasons for believing that Joseph will benefit from her intervention and that any further non-epistemic reasons for intervening align with the epistemic ones. Nonetheless, the problem lies with the relevant-alternatives component, as she definitely fails to evaluate which attitude is going to help Joseph get the most out of his intellectual inquiry. A more careful evaluation would have easily allowed Everyt to acknowledge that the strategy of letting Joseph work at Hilbert's problem on his own would have made him improve his understanding of the solution in a way that Everyt's intervention obviously cannot. Yet, assessing what course of action is going to be more beneficial for the subject interfered with is by no means a condition for one to be an expert. Thus, the example shows that someone's expertise does not ensure that their epistemically paternalistic interferences are justified.

Now, let us analyse whether being an expert is nonetheless a *necessary* condition for justified EP. The fundamental problem with the above definition of an expert is that neither of its conditions can ensure that an expert A has good reasons to think A's interference will make B epistemically better off, for they pertain to someone's having extensive knowledge in a given domain. Instead, what is required for an epistemically paternalistic interference to be justified is that the interferer have a clear view on what is epistemically better to do on behalf of B. Consider the following example:

VIRTUOUS COLLEAGUE. Suppose Emma and Frank are in charge of the recruiting process for a big company that is hiring twenty new employees. Having recently noticed that Frank has developed a bias against female applicants, this time Emma wants to help him. So she asks for Frank's help with the first step in the selection process: evaluating the CVs of two hundred applicants and selecting the best forty profiles. But she provides him with blind CVs in order to prevent his bias from affecting his judgment, and she reveals the identity of the applicants only after he completes his task.

Again, this case satisfies the three conditions of EP: it fulfils the interference condition because Emma prevents Frank from conducting inquiry in whatever way he sees fit; it fulfils the non-consultation condition since Emma does not consult Frank on the issue of whether he would be happy if she blinded the applicants' CVs for him; and it fulfils the improvement

condition, as Emma intervenes with the aim of improving his epistemic agency, namely of enhancing the chances that he get to know which are the most suitable profiles for the job positions that he needs to fill in.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, one might want to argue that her interference is justified, for the available evidence suggests it is highly likely Frank will benefit from the interference compared to relevant alternatives—such as letting him select candidates on the basis of his gender bias—and there are no relevant reasons against intervening that Emma should take into consideration. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the justification of Emma’s interference does not depend on any specific kind of expertise she might have. Rather, what puts her in the best position to fulfil her function as a paternalist interferer is the fact that she is sensitive to her colleague’s biased attitude and acquires good evidence of what is his best epistemic interest.

To further stress this point, let us consider which intellectual abilities allow one to fulfil their function in the epistemic community. I contend that the intellectual virtues required for one to fulfil Goldman’s account of the expert are largely different from those that allow one to satisfy the justification conditions of an epistemically paternalistic interference. Experts need to possess what elsewhere I have called *research-oriented abilities*: virtues that allow one to exploit their fund of knowledge to find and face new problems arising in their field of expertise, such as intellectual curiosity, intellectual creativity, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, firmness, and autonomy. On the other hand, a paternalist interferer is virtuous insofar as they possess *novice-oriented abilities*: virtues that allow them to properly address B’s epistemic dependency on them, thereby putting them in a suitable position for knowing what is epistemically best to do in the service of B. This set of abilities includes traits such as sensitivity to B’s epistemic needs, intellectual generosity, intellectual empathy, sensitivity to B’s epistemic resources, practical wisdom, and maieutic ability.<sup>8</sup>

This distinction bolsters the thesis that cognitive expertise is neither a sufficient requirement for one to be justified in undertaking epistemically paternalistic interferences nor a necessary one. Being an expert is not sufficient for justifying EP, because a person’s expertise does not ensure that they satisfy the epistemic-reasons condition, as they may well lack the ability to evaluate what among several options is the most epistemically beneficial way to interfere with someone’s inquiry. Furthermore, being an expert is not even a necessary condition for justified EP, for as the case of the virtuous colleague shows, someone can fulfil the requirements for justified EP without being an expert.

#### §4 JUSTIFYING EP: THE EPISTEMIC-AUTHORITY STRATEGY

A plausible alternative to the idea that experts constitute the ideal profile of paternalist interferers is offered by a recent discussion on the topic of *epistemic authority* and, in particular, by the service conception of authority that Joseph Raz has proposed as a model of authority in the practical realm (1986) and Linda Zagzebski has recently adopted as a model of authority in the epistemic domain (2012). According to them, the main function of authorities is to serve the governed (or the novice)—that is, to do something in their service (see Raz 1986, 56). On my pluralistic reading of this view, an epistemic authority can fulfil their function in various ways, ranging from imparting true beliefs to a layperson B (Zagzebski 2012) and helping B weigh available evidence (Jäger 2016; Lackey

---

<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Emma’s interference would presumably have clear practical benefits, in that it could lead him to select better candidates. That is not in contrast with the epistemic benefit that her intervention provides, nor does it undermine the epistemic purpose of her actions.

<sup>8</sup> For further clarifications on this distinction between sets of intellectual virtues, see Croce (2017, 19–20).

forthcoming), to imparting understanding to B and leading B to improve their understanding of some subject matter on their own (Croce 2017; Jäger 2016). I suggest we gather these specific services under a broader formula for the function of epistemic authorities, which I call *novice-oriented function*. According to the function requirement of epistemic authorities, a subject A is an epistemic authority for a subject B in domain D iff

[N-OF] A has the capacity to help B achieve epistemic goals in D that B might not be able to achieve on their own.<sup>9</sup>

The corresponding definition requirement can be introduced as follows:

EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY. A subject A is an epistemic authority for a subject B in domain D iff

[EPC] A is better epistemically positioned than B is in D; and  
[AC\*] A possesses at least sensitivity to B's epistemic needs.

A quick comparison between this notion and that of an expert should clarify why in principle epistemic authorities look like a more convincing exemplar of paternalist interferers than experts.

The first distinction concerns the function requirements and illustrates that these categories of epistemic subjects have different roles in the epistemic community. The function of epistemic authorities is to help the interlocutor(s) achieve epistemic goals, as required by N-OF. Yet they have no commitment to fulfil R-OF, which instead explains that the service of experts amounts to making a contribution to the epistemic progress of their field. This distinction has bearing on the definition requirements as well, on which the second difference between the two notions focuses. Instead of Goldman's truth-linked condition, the definition of an epistemic authority includes the epistemic-position condition (EPC),<sup>10</sup> which differs from the former in at least two relevant ways.

On the one hand, EPC does not require that A be epistemically superior to most people in a domain, but rather just to their interlocutor. Thus, one can be an epistemic authority to another about some subject matter without being an expert on that topic. For instance, I might be an epistemic authority for my mother on the history of Scotland simply because I have some vague knowledge of the main battles and events that happened there in the modern era while she knows nothing about this topic, but that would not make me an expert in that domain. Indeed, I could not contribute to the progress of the historical research in this field, as required by R-OF, yet I would still provide my mom with information she lacks and is interested in acquiring and therefore I would fulfil N-OF. On the other hand, EPC does not limit one's epistemic superiority to another to the number of true propositions or core answers one has in a given domain. A can, in fact, be better epistemically positioned than B also by having a better understanding of D, by being more intellectually virtuous than B, or simply by having access to more (or better) evidence. Finally, experts and epistemic authorities need to possess different intellectual virtues. The former should be able to find true answers to the questions arising in their field and therefore need to possess research-oriented abilities. The latter, instead, merely have to be sensitive to the interlocutor's epistemic needs, thereby displaying one of the most important novice-oriented abilities.

---

<sup>9</sup> This definition is grounded in an alternative definition of an expert proposed by Goldman (2016, 2).

<sup>10</sup> More on the notion of "epistemic position" can be found in Fricker (2006).

Let me stress that the pluralistic account of epistemic authority introduced above presents two fundamental advantages over rival views:<sup>11</sup> first, it does not restrict the kind of *practice* that A is entitled to adopt towards B to either imparting information or advising in a more indirect way; second, it does not restrict the *epistemic good* provided by A to either true belief or understanding. Both features are crucial to our argument, in that, first, they allow us to infer that this account of epistemic authority could well include “undertaking paternalistic interferences” as one of the viable ways A can help B achieve epistemic goals in D. Second, they make room for the idea that paternalistic interferences can benefit the interfered subject in various ways. Finally, the differences between experts and authorities introduced above highlight that epistemic authorities are good candidates as exemplars of paternalist interferers because they need to possess a fundamental intellectual virtue, namely the sensitivity to B’s needs, that makes A care about discovering what is epistemically better to do in the service of B. For these reasons, we shall consider whether it might be the case that epistemically paternalistic interferences are justified insofar as the interferer is an epistemic authority.

## §5 REFINING THE ACCOUNT: VIRTUOUS PATERNALIST INTERFERERS

In this section, I will first introduce and discuss two objections to the plausible thesis that epistemic authorities are the ideal profile for paternalist interferers in the epistemic realm. I shall argue that, despite directing us on the right track, this thesis needs to be refined. Then, I will offer a more compelling account of paternalist interferers.

The first problem affecting this thesis sheds light on a relevant asymmetry between the function requirement of epistemic authorities and the function requirement of paternalist interferers. The asymmetry arises in cases where an epistemically paternalistic interference can be beneficial to some extent yet is not grounded in A’s judgment of what is epistemically better to do in the service of B. Let us consider the following modified version of the mathematicians example introduced before:

PROF. EVERYT SOLVED\*. Suppose again that Joseph is working at Hilbert’s problem n.3. This time, he knows that the problem has already been solved, but he does not know the solution. Thus, he decides to work at the problem as if it were still unsolved in order to achieve a deep understanding of its structure. Everyt, his supervisor, stops by Joseph’s desk and, once she notices that he is working on that particular problem, reveals the solution without allowing him to say a word.

This example features a case in which Everyt clearly fulfils N-OF because she has the ability to help Joseph achieve an epistemic good that he lacks: knowledge of the problem’s solution. She also displays some sort of sensitivity to the student’s needs, as she provides him with some useful piece of information. Nevertheless, I contend that her interference is not justified, because Everyt did not consider the impact of her intervention on Joseph’s inquiry nor has she formed any justified belief about alternative courses of action that she might have undertaken, as the epistemic-reasons condition requires. As a matter of fact, we expect a virtuous interferer at least to consider that letting Joseph work on the problem on his own would possibly allow him to achieve both knowledge of the solution and understanding of its structure at the same time with small risk, as he could look the solution up online and

---

<sup>11</sup> Compare, in particular, Croce (2017) with Lackey (forthcoming) and Zagzebski (2012).

get to know how Max Dehn solved this problem in 1900 by appealing to invariants of polyhedra.

Thus, the fundamental asymmetry between the two function requirements at play in the definitions of epistemic authorities and paternalist interferers can be highlighted as follows. On the one hand, N-OF is neutral with respect to the epistemic goal Everyt should paternalistically help Joseph achieve. On the other, it is not sufficient that an interferer A has the ability to help B achieve *some* epistemic goods in D, nor that A has the ability to help B achieve *what B aims at* achieving. Paternalist interferers have a more specific service to fulfil: namely, they need to be able to help B achieve *what is epistemically better* for B in D.

The second objection challenges EPC by raising the doubt that paternalist interferers need not be better epistemically positioned than interfered subjects to successfully provide their service. Consider Emma's profile again in the case of the virtuous colleague. In the last section, I argued that her interference satisfies the conditions of EP introduced in §2 and that it could constitute a justified paternalistic interference. Nonetheless, some might argue that Emma is not an epistemic authority for Frank because she is not epistemically superior to Frank in any relevant sense with respect to the matter at issue. Indeed, both Frank and Emma have worked for decades in the HR department of that company, and already proved to be experienced recruiters. Then we should conclude that EPC is not a necessary condition for one to be justified in undertaking epistemically paternalistic interferences, which would reinforce the thesis that epistemic authorities are not the ideal profile of paternalist interferers.

I am not interested in resisting this conclusion, as I have already argued that the thesis introduced at the beginning of this section needs some refinement. However, I shall undermine the claim that the notion of a paternalist interferer needs no EPC. 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. In fact, the interferer, unlike the subject interfered with, displays the virtue(s) of epistemic justice, which enables the former to be sensitive to the latter's bias and triggers further intellectual virtues, such as the sensitivity to others' needs and epistemic resources, through which they figure out how to help the subject interfered with.

These objections shed light on the fact that paternalist interferers ought to satisfy more stringent requirements than epistemic authorities, both for what concerns the function requirement and for the intellectual virtues they need to display. As for the former, this section has provided support for the idea that a paternalist interferer needs to be able not merely to provide some kind of epistemic benefit for the subjects interfered with, but rather to figure out what is epistemically better for them to do in given circumstances. A full account of a paternalist interferer's function, though, also requires that the interferer be able to evaluate whether the epistemic benefits their interference is likely to generate are in line with further non-epistemic reasons against intervening that they might have, as required by the alignment condition. To clarify this point, consider the following revised version of Emma's case:

VICIOUS COLLEAGUE. Suppose again that Emma and Frank are in charge of recruiting twenty new employees for a big company, and that Emma has recently noticed that Frank has developed a bias against female applicants. However, she also knows Frank is always suspicious of other colleagues and that her move will raise his worries and undermine his trust in her. Nonetheless, she provides him with

200 blind CVs, in order to prevent his bias from affecting his judgment, and asks him to select the best forty profiles.

In the example, Emma’s interference cannot be justified, because it clashes with the available evidence for what is better to do on behalf of Frank in the given circumstances. Specifically, she lacks a necessary concern with maintaining a relationship of mutual trust among colleagues—that is, a non-epistemic reason that does not align with the epistemic reasons supporting Emma’s interference.

Both the function requirement and the definition requirement of a paternalist interferer should reflect Emma’s lack of justification. I propose the following account of virtuous paternalist interferers, whose function requirement maintains that a subject A is a virtuous paternalist interferer for a subject B in domain D iff

[N-OF\*] A has the capacity to help B achieve what is epistemically better for B in D when permitted by the balance of reasons.

Thus, I put forth the following definition requirement:

VIRTUOUS PATERNALIST INTERFERER. A subject A is a virtuous paternalist interferer for a subject B in domain D iff

[EPC] A is better epistemically positioned than B is in D;

[VC] A’s judgment about how to interfere with B’s inquiry is the product of A’s cognitive faculties; and

[AC\*\*] A deploys a wide range of novice-oriented abilities in judging how to intervene.

As should be evident, this definition differs from the account of epistemic authority in two respects. First, the definition, unlike that of an epistemic authority, includes a *virtue condition* (VC), which ensures that the interferer’s decision to intervene arises out of a competent use of their cognitive faculties. This requirement is necessary to avoid parallel Gettier-style cases, where the fact that A’s interference fulfils the epistemic-reasons condition and the alignment condition is simply a matter of luck.<sup>12</sup> Imagine, for example, a case in which a doctor breaks a patient’s right not to know the result of a medical test, because she has a justified belief that he will benefit from knowing that he is in good health. Unbeknownst to her, someone replaced the result of the test with someone else’s. As it turns out, the two tests had identical results. Thus, the doctor’s reasoning and judgment about whether to interfere with his agency would not have been different had she considered the correct results. Yet her beliefs about both the patient’s health situation and the best way to intervene are not justified, as they are true simply because of luck. A virtue condition allows us to ensure that a case like this does not become an example of justified EP.

Second, the definition of a virtuous paternalist advisor includes a stronger version of the ability condition, which is meant to accommodate the fact that paternalist interferers have a different, stricter function to fulfil than epistemic authorities. Indeed, for one to be in a position to accomplish N-OF\* it is necessary that they not only be sensitive to another’s epistemic needs, but also that they be able to weigh the epistemic benefit against possible non-epistemic reasons not to interfere—thereby displaying practical wisdom—and to make

---

<sup>12</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

sure that the subject interfered with is in a position to take advantage of the epistemic good they try to provide them with—thereby displaying sensitivity to their epistemic resources.

This account allows us to explain why Emma is a virtuous paternalist interferer in the first example (the virtuous colleague) while she fails to satisfy the requirements in the second case (the vicious colleague). Specifically, in the former scenario, Emma not only fulfils EPC, as we have seen early on in this section, but also VC and AC\*\*, since her judgment about how to help Frank is the product of her cognitive faculties and she proves herself able to make a virtuous use of her novice-oriented abilities by determining that the balance of reasons favours her intervention. For this reason, she proves herself able to accomplish N-OF\*, and therefore she can be considered a virtuous paternalist interferer. In the latter scenario, instead, Emma fails to fulfil both the function requirement and the definition requirement. As for the former, her inability to evaluate whether the epistemic reasons for interfering are aligned with the non-epistemic ones shows that she is unable to figure out what is epistemically better to do in Frank's service. As for the latter, although her judgment is the product of her cognitive faculties and she is better epistemically positioned than her colleague because she is aware of his bias against female applicants, she does not fulfil AC\*\*. For the fact that Emma has low concern for the potential harms of her interference indicates a failure to exercise her novice-oriented abilities in a virtuous way—particularly, practical wisdom as well as sensitivity to his needs and resources.<sup>13</sup>

## §6 BENEFITS OF THE ACCOUNT AND THE CHALLENGE OF INSTITUTIONAL PATERNALIST INTERFERERS

Before concluding this inquiry into the features of paternalist interferers in the epistemic realm, I want to shed light on several benefits of the proposed account and address one final challenge.

First, this account of a virtuous paternalist interferer settles the original worry with Goldman's thesis that one can undertake epistemically paternalistic interferences insofar as one is an expert. I showed that his account of an expert underestimates a fundamental feature of paternalist interferers, namely that they need to have justified beliefs on what is epistemically better for the subject interfered with to do in given circumstances. Thus, paternalist interferers, unlike experts, need to care about the epistemic well-being of the subject interfered with as well as to display and appropriately exercise what I have called novice-oriented abilities.

Second, the account goes beyond Goldman's and Ahlstrom-Vij's limited veritistic perspective to endorse a broader view of the epistemic well-being that includes both knowledge and understanding as valuable epistemic goods promoted by paternalistic interferences, as suggested in Pritchard (2013).

Third, this inquiry into who can justifiably undertake epistemically paternalistic interferences accounts for a special way to offer guidance in the epistemic realm and therefore individuates a peculiar way in which an epistemically superior subject may do something in the service of another. This analysis shows that the function of paternalist interferers should not be reduced either to that of experts or to that of epistemic authorities, as the former,

---

<sup>13</sup> A similar story could be told to explain why Everyt, in the case of Prof. Everyt Solved\*, is not a virtuous paternalist advisor. Everyt does not fulfil N-OF\*, because she fails to display the capacity to weigh the epistemic and the non-epistemic reasons for interfering with Joseph's inquiry. Even though she is better epistemically positioned than him in the domain of Hilbert's problems, she proves to be insensitive to his needs and resources, and she lacks the ability to guide him in the right direction without doing all the work on his behalf.

unlike the others, need to be able to balance epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for intervention on behalf of someone who may not be aware that another is interfering with their own agency.

Despite the benefits of the proposed account of paternalist advisors, one might worry that this view has a very limited scope in that it only applies to one-to-one relationships between two epistemic subjects, one of which is better epistemically positioned and more intellectually virtuous than the other. However, any plausible account of epistemic paternalism should take into consideration cases in which groups and institutions undertake epistemically paternalistic interferences towards one or many epistemic subjects. That might be the case, for example, with a state imposing compulsory school age and with a health department mandating the introduction of prediction models for medical diagnosis and prognosis in order to prevent clinicians from overestimating their expertise and clinical abilities. Setting aside whether these particular interferences may or may not be justified, one might contend that the account I endorse cannot explain who would be a virtuous paternalist interferer in similar cases.

In the rest of this section, I want to resist this claim and provide support for the thesis that the virtuous paternalist interferer can be extended to accommodate cases of group and institutional paternalist advisors. I contend that this can be the case because there are available ways to extend EPC and VC to groups, but more importantly because there can be collective and institutional virtues (see, e.g., Fricker 2010; Lahroodi 2007) and there is no principled reason why novice-oriented abilities cannot be part of these sets of virtues. I shall also admit that what follows should be considered as a first inquiry into an unexplored issue, rather than a conclusive argument in favour of this model of paternalist advisors in the epistemic domain.

Let us quickly consider the possibility of extending EPC to groups and institutions. All we need to show in this regard is that it can definitely be the case that collective entities—for example, committees, governments, or juries—are better epistemically positioned than other subjects in their activity as collectives and institutional structures. Indeed, the flourishing literature in this branch of social epistemology has already shown that groups intended as collectives can acquire knowledge and understanding.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it can be argued that some groups are better epistemically positioned than others in a given domain by virtue of possessing more knowledge or better understanding. For example, it can be said that a scientific team conducting experimental research on the benefits and the harms of eating red meat is better epistemically positioned on the topic of the impact of food on human health than a farmers association.

For what concerns the virtue condition and the possibility of extending it to collective epistemic agents, I shall limit myself to mentioning that Kallestrup has recently defended a collective-virtue epistemology along the lines of Sosa's view. More will have to be said on these topics, but what interests us here is the possibility of arguing that a group can have knowledge “when the truth of its belief is a product of its innermost competence ... in suitable shape and situation” (forthcoming, 10) provided that the group forms the appropriate joint intentions (12–13). From the combination of the basics of a collective-virtue epistemology and Kallestrup's remark that the epistemic aims of a group may well extend beyond the acquisition of knowledge (15), it follows that an institution can fulfil VC, if its judgment about whether to interfere with someone's inquiry for their own epistemic benefit manifests its innermost competence in suitable shape and situation. Thus, there are ways to prevent

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Bird (2010); Gilbert (2002, 2013); and Lackey (2012, 2014). Seminal work on the notion of group understanding can be found in Brady (2016), although more has yet to be said on the topic.

a Gettier-style case of an institution's epistemically paternalistic intervention into someone's inquiry from being justified.

Let us now focus on how collectives can possess novice-oriented abilities. Fricker has proposed a twofold model for group virtues that includes both motive-based virtues and skill-based virtues. An example of the former is a diligent and thorough research team, whose members behave as follows:

Its members all jointly commit to the motives of diligence and thoroughness; and the team lives up to those motives by proving reliable, over an appropriate span of time and contexts, in achieving their ends. Their research team displays irreducibly collective forms of diligence and thoroughness. They display these virtues as 'a body', or *as one*. (2010, 242)

As for skill-based virtues, Fricker asks us to imagine a night-watch team of four soldiers who divide the labour so that each of them looks one direction and performs their task without any specific motive but rather just acts as they are trained to do, thereby displaying the virtue of vigilance as a collective skill on an excellence- or skill-based model of virtue (243).

Similar considerations can be introduced about novice-oriented abilities, depending on whether you want to conceive them as motive-based or skill-based virtues. I shall not take a stand here on this point, particularly because I am inclined to think of novice-oriented abilities as a set that can include both kinds of virtues. Rather, it is important to highlight that, for example, a group of educational scientists working at a reformation of the regional educational policies could—and, in fact, should—as a body be sensitive to the epistemic resources of the youngest generations of students as well as to their epistemic needs; and that a group of statisticians introducing prediction models into a hospital's clinical policies to increase the accuracy of clinicians' diagnoses could—and, in fact, should—possess novice-oriented abilities as well.

However, going from group virtues to institutional virtues requires one more step of analysis, as institutions differ from groups in that they have structures and procedures but are not agents and possess no will. Thus, Fricker points out that institutions can possess and exhibit virtues only insofar as the individuals or the groups that create an institution's structures and procedures are virtuous (249). This model of institutional virtues allows us to contend that a region, a hospital, or a state department can fulfil AC\*\* insofar as (i) the group that works at building the institution's structures and procedures displays novice-oriented abilities as a body, and (ii) the institution's structures and procedures encourage and reflect virtuous behaviour on the part of the aforementioned group.

In conclusion, these considerations show that the three conditions of the virtuous paternalist interferer can apply to groups and institutions, thereby reflecting the idea that even a collective can be justified in undertaking epistemically paternalistic interferences insofar as it displays (a) appropriate competence in judging whether to interfere, (b) some sort of epistemic superiority to the subject interfered with, and (c) those virtues that put it in a position to evaluate what is epistemically better to do in their service. The project of extending this account of paternalist advisors in the epistemic domain to institutions should also take into consideration that the bigger is the number of the subjects affected by an institution's interference, the more complicated will weighing epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for intervention be. As a matter of fact, it seems reasonable that it takes more for an institution interfering with the agency of hundreds or thousands of people to fulfil the

requirements of a virtuous paternalist advisor than it does for subjects like Everyt or Emma in our examples.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the fairly new topic of epistemic paternalism from an original point of view, namely by analysing the requirements that allow one to be considered a virtuous paternalist interferer in the epistemic realm. After introducing the conditions for an interference to be epistemically paternalistic and two prominent strategies for justifying EP (§2), I argued against Goldman’s thesis that experts are the most appropriate candidate as paternalist advisors (§3). In §4, I suggested the notion of an epistemic authority—instead of that of an expert—as a plausible ground for an account of a paternalist interferer. As it turned out, the proposed view suffered from several problems, yet it allowed us to shed light on a fundamental feature that virtuous paternalist advisors need to exercise, namely the capacity to help subjects interfered with achieve what is epistemically better for them in a given situation. Based on this consideration, I proposed a virtue-based account of the paternalist interferer and showed how it accommodates common cases of epistemically paternalistic interferences (§5). Finally, I highlighted the benefits of the account and showed how it can apply to cases in which the interferer is a group or an institution (§6).

My ultimate hope is that this paper not only contributes to studying a topic in social epistemology that is still in need of further work, but also that it demonstrates how virtue epistemology and, in particular, the study of intellectual virtues can contribute to the research in epistemology as a whole.<sup>15</sup>

Department of Philosophy,  
University of Edinburgh  
Dugald Stewart Building  
Room 2.16  
3 Charles Street, EH8 9AD  
[Michel.croce@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Michel.croce@ed.ac.uk)

## References

- Ahlstrom-Vij, Kristoffer. 2013. *Epistemic Paternalism: A Defence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bird, Alexander. 2010. “Social Knowing: The Social Sense of ‘Scientific Knowledge’.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 24, no. 1:23-56.
- Brady, Michael. 2016. “Group Emotion and Group Understanding.” In *The Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives*, edited by Michael Brady and Miranda Fricker, 95-110. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>15</sup> Earlier versions of this paper have been presented in 2017 at the 6th WFAP Graduate Conference, at the University of Vienna; at the Summer School in Social Epistemology, at the Autonomous University of Madrid; at the New Trends in Epistemology Conference, at the University of Pavia; and at the 3rd Diaphora Workshop on A-priori Knowledge, at the University of Stirling. I am grateful to the audiences on these occasions for their helpful comments. Thanks also go to Aidan McGlynn, Duncan Pritchard, Shane Ryan, and an anonymous reviewer. Work on this article has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement n. 675415.

- Bullock, Emma. 2016. "Knowing and Not-Knowing For Your Own Good: The Limits of Epistemic Paternalism." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. doi: 10.1111/japp.12220.
- Croce, Michel. 2017. "Expert-oriented Abilities vs. Novice-oriented Abilities: An Alternative Account of Epistemic Authority." *Episteme*. doi: 10.1017/epi.2017.16.
- Dworkin, Richard. 2017. "Paternalism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paternalism/>>.
- Feinberg, Joel. 1986. *Harm to Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, Elizabeth. 2006. "Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy." In *The Epistemology of Testimony*, edited by Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa, 225-50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2010. "Can There Be Institutional Virtues?" In *Oxford Readings in Epistemology vol. 3*, edited by Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne, 235-52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2002. "Belief and Acceptance as Features of Groups." *Protosociology* 16:35-69.
- Gilbert, Margaret. 2013. *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, Alvin. 1991. "Epistemic Paternalism: Communication Control in Law and Society." *The Journal of Philosophy* 88, no. 3:113-131.
- Goldman, Alvin. 2016. "Expertise." *Topoi*. doi: 10.1007/s11245-016-9410-3.
- Jäger, Christoph. 2016. "Epistemic Authority, Preemptive Reasons, and Understanding." *Episteme* 13, no. 2: 67-85.
- Kallestrup, Jesper. Forthcoming. "Group Virtue Epistemology." *Synthese*. doi: 10.1007/s11229-016-1225-7
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2012. "Group Knowledge Attributions." In *New Essays on Knowledge Ascriptions*, edited by Jessica Brown and Mikkel Gerken, 243-69. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2014. "Socially Extended Knowledge." *Philosophical Issues* 24, no. 1:282-98.
- Lackey, Jennifer. Forthcoming. "Experts and Peer Disagreement." In *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, edited by Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Dani Rabinowitz. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lahroodi, Reza. 2007. "Collective Epistemic Virtues." *Social Epistemology* 21, no. 3:281-97.
- Pritchard, Duncan. 2009. "Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 64:95-111.
- Pritchard, Duncan. 2013. "Epistemic Paternalism and Epistemic Value." *Philosophical Inquiries* 1, no. 2:9-37.
- Raz, Joseph. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ryan, Shane. 2016. "Paternalism: An Analysis." *Utilitas* 28, no. 2:123-35.
- Watson, Jamie Carlin. 2016. "The Shoulders of Giants: A Case for Non-veritism about Expert Authority." *Topoi*. doi: 10.1007/s11245-016-9421-0.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 2012. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.