*Introduction: Puzzles Concerning Epistemic Autonomy*

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A couple of years ago, nearly 30 scholars from Princeton, Harvard, and Yale signed an open letter to incoming freshman.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this letter, these scholars urged new students to think for themselves. Their advice echoed the motto of the enlightenment: Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding.[[2]](#footnote-2) These scholars warned of being tyrannized by public opinion and falling prey to echo chambers. A love of truth, they claimed, should motivate you to think for yourself, exercising open-mindedness, critical thinking, and debate.

Along these lines, many philosophers see promoting the autonomy of students as one of the primary goals of higher education.[[3]](#footnote-3) For instance, the stated goal of many introductory philosophy texts is to get students to think for themselves.[[4]](#footnote-4) While there is clearly some sense in which the advice to ‘think for yourselves’ is good advice and the goal of developing autonomous students is a good goal to have, the call to think for yourself also leads to a number of puzzles. These puzzles concern the nature and value of epistemic autonomy.

While moral autonomy and political autonomy have received a great deal of attention in the philosophical literature, rather little investigation has been conducted regarding the nature and value of *epistemic* autonomy. While moral autonomy is of utmost moral importance, and political autonomy is of great political importance, the epistemic value of epistemic autonomy is far more contentious and obscure. Much recent work in epistemology has attempted to gain insights from neighboring normative fields like ethics and social & political philosophy. Insights regarding moral virtues have been used to better understand intellectual virtues (see Zagzebski 1996). Insights regarding justice and injustice have been used to better understand epistemic justice and injustice (see Fricker 2009). Insights regarding political authority have been used to better understand expertise and epistemic authority (see Zagzebski 2012). Along these lines, the nature and value of autonomy has long been discussed in ethics and social & political philosophy, but only recently is it beginning to receive attention within epistemology. The research in social epistemology and virtue epistemology in the last decade have laid a perfect backdrop for a greater exploration of the nature and value of epistemic autonomy.

In this chapter we will lay the foundation to explore four broad sets of puzzles that emerge regarding epistemic autonomy and outline the contributions to these debates contained in this volume. These sets of puzzles concern (i) how to conceive of epistemic autonomy, (ii) how epistemic paternalism is related to epistemic autonomy, (iii) whether epistemic autonomy is an intellectual virtue and whether it has epistemic value, and (iv) how to think about epistemic autonomy within the broader context of social epistemology.

*I: The Nature of Epistemic Autonomy*

Joseph Raz (1988) claims that the autonomous person determines the course of their life for themselves. (407) Put differently, autonomy rules out coercion, manipulation, and other ways of subjecting your will to another. Epistemic autonomy carries this notion into the domain of epistemology by focusing on our intellectual lives. Elizabeth Fricker (2006) describes a supposed ideal of an epistemically autonomous person as someone who “takes no one else’s word for anything, but accepts only what she has found out for herself, relying only on her own cognitive faculties.” (225) Similarly, Linda Zagzebski (2007) claims that an epistemically autonomous person “will demand proof of p that she can determine by the use of her own faculties, given her own previous beliefs, but she will never believe anything on testimony.” (252) As Sandy Goldberg puts it,

an epistemically autonomous subject is one who judges and decides for herself, where her judgments and decisions are reached on the basis of reasons which she has in her possession, where she appreciates the significance of these reasons, and where (if queried) she could articulate the bearing of her reasons on the judgment or decision in question. (Goldberg 2013, 169)

Here, the idea is that the epistemically autonomous person demands direct, or first-order, reasons why something is true, and does not merely rely on reports about their existence. Epistemically autonomous individuals are epistemically self-reliant and are responsible for the justification of their beliefs.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As Kristof Ahlstrom-Vij sees it, there is both a positive and negative aspect to epistemic autonomy. The epistemically autonomous person does not simply rely on the word of others, and they do conduct their own inquiry, relying on their own cognitive resources. (92) So, while the autonomous person need not live free of any outside influence, she must nevertheless be determining things for herself, whether they be her actions, or determinations about what to believe.[[6]](#footnote-6) Why might there be a problem with such a reliance on others? Some have seen such epistemic dependence as a kind of free-riding where individuals are freely benefiting on the intellectual labors of others.[[7]](#footnote-7) Others see beliefs formed simply on the say-so of others as second-hand goods, lacking important value had by beliefs one has evaluated on their own.

Both Fricker (2006) and Zagzebksi (2007) see epistemic autonomy, so understood, as having no real value, at least for creatures like us. As Fricker puts it, any being like us that attempted to live a fully epistemically autonomous live would be “either paranoid, or severely cognitively lacking, or deeply rationally incoherent.” (244) John Hardwig (1985) echoes this sentiment claiming, “If I were to pursue epistemic autonomy across the board, I would succeed only in holding uninformed, unreliable, crude, untested, and therefore irrational beliefs.” (340) After all, we are finite creatures with limited cognitive abilities and time, so making the independent judgments required by epistemic autonomy is quite costly.[[8]](#footnote-8) If we needed to figure everything out for ourselves, we wouldn’t ever figure out very much. Our epistemic success depends on others.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In contrast, others build normativity into the very concept of epistemic autonomy. Robert Roberts and Jay Woods claim that an epistemically autonomous individual is “properly regulated by others” (260) so exercising epistemic autonomy “involves a reasonable, active use of guidance from another.” (267) Here, epistemic autonomy is thought of as thinking for yourself well, or in the right way, not simply thinking for yourself. As Zagzebski (2013) understands intellectual autonomy, a concept she distinguishes from epistemic autonomy, it is “the right or ideal of self-direction in the acquisition or maintenance of beliefs” which requires an appropriate amount of self-trust. (259) On this understanding of epistemic autonomy, the autonomous thinker succeeds in placing the appropriate weight on their own thoughts and knows when to outsource their intellectual projects to those that are better positioned to determine the truth of the matter. Some see epistemic autonomy, so understood, as central to the very idea of epistemic agency itself (Grasswick, 196).

Even if epistemic autonomy has value, its value may be limited to some domains. Joseph Shieber (2010) argues that Kant’s dictum to ‘think for yourself’ should be limited to philosophical, moral, and mathematical matters. This fits with the idea that many philosophers have that there is something amiss with moral deference in contrast to other forms of deference.[[10]](#footnote-10) While there does not seem to be anything inappropriate about deferring to an archeologist about the age of some artifact, some find something problematic about taking on your moral, religious, or philosophical beliefs simply on someone else’s say-so. If the value of epistemic autonomy is domain relative, then what features of these domains give it its value, and why?

Finally, there are questions regarding what the epistemically autonomous person is autonomous about. Thus far, we have presumed that individuals are epistemically autonomous with respect to their *beliefs* – how they manage their own doxastic attitudes. However, Finnur Dellsén (2018) has argued that the ideal of epistemic autonomy is better understood with respect to *acceptance* – treating something as true – rather than belief. (3) We can also see epistemic autonomy as applying more broadly with respect to actions like inquiry, evidence gathering, and decisions regarding which intellectual projects one pursues.[[11]](#footnote-11) For one thing, acceptance and inquiry seem to be under the control of individuals in ways that their beliefs are not. So, to the degree that epistemic autonomy requires voluntary control, we may have reasons to prefer different views about the object of epistemic autonomy.

*Summaries*

In Chapter 1, “Epistemic Autonomy and Externalism,” J. Adam Carter makes the case that there is a kind of attitudinal autonomy, what he calls ‘epistemic autonomy’, that matters for propositional knowledge. In order for a subject to know a proposition, they must have exercised epistemic autonomy in forming the target belief. Having established that this type of attitudinal autonomy is importantly different than the kind of attitudinal autonomy discussed in the literature on moral responsibility, Carter also explores the prospects of internalism and externalism about epistemic autonomy. Having dismissed internalism about epistemic autonomy, Carter argues that history-sensitive externalism shows the most promise amongst externalist theories.

In Chapter 2, “Autonomy, Reflection, and Education,” Shane Ryan argues that on the assumption that developing autonomy is an aim of education, that educating should not remain neutral on the conception of the good. He further contends that reflection is essential to autonomy and that neutrality on the good is impossible if we are to promote skillful reflection, instead of unskillful reflection. Ryan appeals to the dual process theory of reasoning in order to explain his preferred account of reflection. Type 1 processes are fast and automatic, while Type 2 processes are slow and controlled. While it might be tempting to conclude that reflection involves only Type 2 processes, Ryan argues that Type 1 processes explain important parts of reflection including the ‘when’ and ‘how’. This bolsters the idea that education cannot stay neutral about the good since decisions about what to reflect upon are inevitable.

In Chapter 3, “The Realm of Epistemic Ends,” Catherine Elgin distances the notion of epistemic autonomy from that of intellectual independence. Elgin argues that autonomy is instead better understood as self-governance. Building on her earlier work on epistemic normativity, Elgin argues that epistemically autonomous agents collectively certify epistemic norms by justifying those norms to those in their epistemic community. On this account, epistemic autonomy and intellectual interdependence are mutually supporting, rather than standing in conflict with each other. Elgin also defends this account from the charge that it permits a troubling form of epistemic relativism.

In Chapter 4, “Professional Philosophy has an Epistemic Autonomy Problem,” Maura Priest explores a conception of epistemic autonomy as intellectual self-governance and argues that contemporary professional philosophy has an epistemic autonomy problem. While epistemic autonomy is compatible with a reliance on others, intellectual self-governance requires a significant amount of control over one’s intellectual projects. Given the nature of philosophy, we should expect philosophers to have a great deal of epistemic autonomy. However, Priest identifies several impediments to autonomous inquiry that exist in contemporary professional philosophy and argues that we are all worse off because of them.

*II: Epistemic Autonomy and Paternalism*

Suppose we discover that an individual is epistemically better off for having certain parts of evidence excluded from her assessment of the evidence about some given topic. Perhaps the individual is much more likely to arrive at true belief or knowledge if she examines only a subset of the evidence instead of the entire body of relevant evidence. The idea that an individual is advantaged for having certain evidence screened off from her is the general line of reasoning most often used in defenses of *epistemic paternalism.*

Epistemic paternalism occurs, roughly, when some agent X is making a doxastic decision about a question Q, and another agent Y has control over the evidence provided to X, and Y need not make available all of the relevant evidence about Q to X if doing so makes it more likely that X will arrive at the truth about Q. As it stands, it seems that there are two assumptions needed to defend epistemic paternalism. The first is veritism. If truth is not the primary epistemic goal in question, then the most prominent defenses of epistemic paternalism fail (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013; Goldman 1991). Consider that just because a paternalistic practice might help enable one to arrive at true beliefs, it in no way follows that it offers the same help at arriving at a more complex doxastic state such as *understanding*. Consider that I could come to arrive at truths about some topic by believing whatever a reliable person tells me. Yet it doesn’t follow from this that I would gain understanding, which partly involves seeing how things fit together. The second assumption is epistemic consequentialism. This is the view that positive epistemic consequences ought to be one of the main aims of epistemically responsible agents. So, in order for epistemic paternalism to be justified, the end in question needs to be arriving at a positive veritistic result. Indeed, Alvin Goldman’s favorite example intended to justify epistemic paternalism regards legal evidentiary rules where the goal of such rules is to help jurors arrive at correct verdict. Goldman stresses given each of our own epistemic limitations we will often benefit from paternalism. He says that “we live in an epistemically complex world, where each of us cannot reasonably hope to assess all evidence for all theses personally. We often have to depend on the authority of others. Given this situation, it seems likely that epistemic paternalism will frequently be necessary, and sometimes epistemically desirable” (Goldman 1991, 126-127).

An important question this volume explores regards the relationship between epistemic paternalism and epistemic autonomy, for they are in clear tension with one another. Suppose that Sally is a juror in a criminal case. Sally does not have access to all of the evidence. Indeed, some of the evidence presented to the judge by both the prosecution and defense is deemed inadmissible because it is unduly prejudicial (i.e. it is likely to lead Sally and her fellow jurors astray). But this means that, in at least some important sense and to at least some degree, Sally lacks epistemic autonomy. She is not free to evaluate all of the evidence for herself and to make determinations of its significance for herself. The evidence she can access is selected for her and she has no input into that process. The defender of epistemic paternalism is likely to say that it is justified inasmuch as it helps Sally arrive at the truth, but if epistemic autonomy is also of value, then we at least have competing values at stake. Limiting evidence in this way further contrasts with the idea that having more evidence is in general better for arriving at the truth.

Complete epistemic paternalism is incompatible with total epistemic autonomy. But an agent can have some degree of epistemic interference while maintaining a certain amount of epistemic autonomy. Is there a correct balance between these two extremes? If yes, what is that balance? If no, which of the paternalism and autonomy are to be preferred? All else being equal isn’t it better for someone to arrive at the truth *on their own*? If arriving at true beliefs is an achievement of some kind it might be better to arrive at true beliefs without relying on epistemic paternalism (e.g. Greco 2010). Wouldn’t it better if Sally arrived at the correct verdict on her own, without the need for epistemic interference? And yet it doesn’t right to think Sally would be worse if she arrived at an altogether false belief as opposed to relying on paternalism to arrive at a true belief. The chapters in this section will examine these and related questions.

*Chapter Summaries*

In Chapter 5, “Norms of Inquiry, Student-led Learning, and Epistemic Paternalism,” Robert Mark Simpson explores whether epistemic paternalism is ever justified outside of legal contexts where the practice is well-entrenched. In particular, Simpson is most interested in whether epistemic paternalism is justified in contexts of inquiry. He argues that an information controller is better able to assist others in their inquiry if they are sensitive to the interests of the inquirers in question. An information controller, then, should thus be operating in consultation with the inquirers. Simpson applies these considerations to defend the idea of student-led learning. Teachers should consult with students about the topics they are interested in, because it’s easier to benefit someone epistemically if you know their interests.

In Chapter 6, “Persuasion and Intellectual Autonomy” Robin McKenna examines the tension between responsible public policy making and democratic legitimacy. In order to be responsible, such policies should be made based on the available scientific evidence. But in order to be democratic there must be broad acceptance of such policies which implies there must be broad acceptance of the scientific basis for such polices in the first place. The tension arises, however, because in many cases there is a sizable minority that rejects the science in question. In the cases of climate policy in the US, he argues that the tension cannot be resolved (alone) by better science education or the development of critical thinking ability. What may help is what McKenna calls ‘marketing methods’ - methods one may think are at odds with intellectual autonomy - that are aimed at selling a product (i.e. climate science) instead simply providing more evidence. McKenna argues that there might be cases where science marketing actually facilitates critical reasoning and hence promotes intellectual autonomy.

In Chapter 7, “What’s Epistemic About Epistemic Paternalism?” Liz Jackson surveys a number of different understandings of epistemic paternalism before examining various normative questions about it. Jackson worries that current definitions of epistemic paternalism tend be too broad so as to admit of cases clearly not paternalistic or too narrow so as to exclude clear cases of paternalism. Jackson also wonders whether there are very many cases of ‘pure’ epistemic paternalism because most of the cases mentioned in the literature include other considerations. For instance, evidentiary rules in court proceedings have a significant moral dimension because it is immoral to convict and punish innocent persons. Additionally, she doubts whether epistemic paternalism can ever be morally or all-things-considered justified, even if there are cases where it is epistemically justified.

*III: Epistemic Autonomy and Epistemic Virtue & Value*

In recent years there has been a growth in the subfield known as virtue epistemology. Instead of focusing on analyzing propositional knowledge in the form of S knows that P just in case certain conditions obtain, virtue epistemologists focus on the specific traits an agent needs to manifest when acquiring knowledge. With the focus on the character of the knower, one question which quickly emerges is whether agents manifest an epistemic virtue or a vice when being epistemically autonomous.

On one hand, thinking for yourself seems virtuous; at least *prima facie*, it’s a positive achievement if a knower arrives at knowledge her own. Being in possession of the relevant reasons and seeing for yourself their support for the truth of some claim is quite valuable. On the other hand, being unwilling to rely on others for knowledge acquisition seems to clearly exhibit arrogance and a harmful hyper-autonomy (Roberts and Wood 2007, 236). Further, an insistence on ‘seeing it for oneself’ can be problematic. It can demonstrate a defective lack of trust in others, like when someone feels the need to double-check their friend’s testimony even while knowing they are reliable. The need to ‘see it for oneself’ can even perpetuate epistemic injustice and oppression, like when one fails to trust the reported experiences of others when they differ from your own (i.e. reports of sexual harassment).

The intellectual virtue of epistemic autonomy would need to navigate the course between either of these extremes. Nathan King see epistemic autonomy as the mean between the intellectual vices of servility and isolation. (58) When one is intellectual servile, they outsource their entire intellectual life. When one exhibits the vice of isolation, they ignore the valuable insights and intellectual labors of others. Perhaps Thomas Scanlon (1972) expresses the appropriate balance between reliance on oneself and on others when he writes that:

[A]n autonomous person cannot accept without independent consideration the judgment of others as to what he should believe or what he should do.  He may rely on the judgment of others, but when he does so he must be prepared to advance independent reasons for thinking their judgment likely to be correct, and to weigh the evidential value of their opinion against contrary evidence.” (216)

Here, while the autonomous person need not come to possess the testifier’s reasons for believing the proposition in question, she does possess, and require, reasons to trust the testifier in the first place. As King puts this sentiment, “autonomy requires thinking for ourselves, not by ourselves.” (55) Jesus Vega-Encabo (2008) too sees the relevant excess not as epistemic dependency, but heteronomy.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It’s also worth noting that epistemic autonomy need not be only benefit individuals. Some suggest that groups comprised of heterogenous thinkers typically outperform groups made up of homogenous thinkers (Lougheed 2020, 69-77). Groups containing members who disagree with one another tend to get better epistemic results than those groups in which members don’t challenge each other. If this is right, then epistemic autonomy could benefit collective or social knowledge; It's better when groups contain agents are epistemically autonomous.[[13]](#footnote-13) This describes the benefits of a particular method for acquiring knowledge. However, Linda Zagzebski suggests that knowledge acquired on one’s own is no better than the same knowledge acquired by relying on the testimony of another. Thus, while the collective could be benefit of epistemically autonomous individuals, it’s not clear that autonomy should be pursued for its own sake. On the other hand, some have argued that epistemic states such as understanding *cannot* be gained via testimony. Individuals must come to understanding on their own, and so epistemic autonomy turns out be necessary in order to achieve understanding.[[14]](#footnote-14) Finally, Zagzebski argues that epistemic autonomy is sometimes incompatible with self-reliance. For Zagzebski, epistemic autonomy requires conscientiousness, and doing one’s best can call for deferring to an epistemic authority.

This discussion has close connections to the epistemic virtue of intellectual humility which has garnered much recent attention.[[15]](#footnote-15) Roberts and Wood explain that humility is best understood as the opposite of certain vices including vanity and arrogance (2007, 258). An intellectual humble individual is less concerned with accolades than they are with truth, justification, knowledge, etc. According to Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder (2017), intellectual humility consists in being appropriately attentive to, and owning, one’s intellectual limitations. According to this account,

owning one’s intellectual limitations *characteristically* involves dispositions to: (1) believe that one has them; and to believe that their negative outcomes are due to them; (2) to admit or acknowledge them; (3) to care about them and take them seriously; and (4) to feel regret or dismay, but not hostility, about them. (519)

When owning your limitations is motivated by a love of the truth, Whitcomb et. al. see intellectual humility as an intellectual virtue. Along these lines, Roberts and Wood hypothesize that “just about everybody will be epistemically better off for having, and having associates who have, epistemic humility” (Roberts and Wood 2007, 271-272). However, once we accept our own epistemic limitations, what, if anything, is the value of epistemic autonomy? There seems to be some tension between these two apparent intellectual virtues. Do we need to strive for a balance between intellectual humility and epistemic autonomy?

Not everyone sees epistemic autonomy as a virtue. Lorraine Code argues that the ‘ideal of epistemic autonomy’ comes from a dated Cartesian epistemological picture that ignores the important social and political contexts of epistemic agents. As epistemologist have become more aware of epistemic importance of one’s social context, the value of epistemic autonomy may come to be seen as a relic of an overly individualistic conception of epistemology that ignores the cooperative aspects of knowledge. Of help here, may be a revised notion of epistemic autonomy that draws on the literature on relational-autonomy.[[16]](#footnote-16) Relational-autonomy incorporates into the concept of autonomy the insight that we are socially situated creatures that are mutually dependent upon others. According to such conceptions of autonomy, autonomous agents must stand in certain social relations. As MacKenzie and Stoljar put it, relational autonomy is “premised on a shared conviction that persons are socially embedded, that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social

determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity.” (MacKenzie and Stoljar 2000, 4).

*Chapter Summaries*

In Chapter 8, “Intellectual Autonomy and Intellectual Interdependence,” Heather Battaly proposes accounts of two traits: intellectual autonomy and intellectual interdependence. Intellectual autonomy involves dispositions to think for yourself, whereas intellectual interdependence involves dispositions to think with others. Battaly then explores when these two traits can be intellectual virtues, arguing that the corresponding virtues require both good judgment and proper motivation. Battaly also argues that since deficiencies in one trait needn’t correspond to excesses in the other, it is best to see intellectual autonomy and intellectual interdependence as two distinct, though related, traits and virtues.

In Chapter 9, “The Virtue of Epistemic Autonomy,” Jonathan Matheson develops and motivates an account of the virtue of epistemic autonomy. Matheson gleans some desiderata for a virtue of epistemic autonomy through critiquing extant accounts of this intellectual virtue, and proceeds to offers his own account of the character virtue that fulfills them. On Matheson’s account, the character virtue of epistemic autonomy involves the dispositions i) to make good judgments about how, and when, to rely on your own thinking, as well as how, and when, to rely on the thinking of others; ii) to conduct inquiry in line with the judgments in (i); and iii) to do so because one loves the truth and appropriately cares about epistemic goods.

In Chapter 10, “Understanding and the Value of Intellectual Autonomy,” Jesús Vega-Encabo examines several arguments concerning what makes intellectual autonomy epistemically valuable. These arguments claim that intellectual autonomy is epistemically valuable for the role it plays in cognitive achievements, like understanding. Vega-Encabo finds each of these arguments wanting in that they fail to locate any value in intellectual autonomy that does not rely on the value of autonomy more generally. In their place, he argues that intellectual autonomy is valuable because it is essentially linked to the building and preserving of our intellectual identities.

In Chapter 11, “Epistemic Myopia,” Chris Dragos examines questions about how individuals can keep their most fundamental commitments in good epistemic standing. On one account, in order to keep fundamental commitments in good epistemic standing one must be receptive to dialogue about them with trustworthy critics. Epistemic myopia occurs when an individual becomes unreceptive to trustworthy criticism, and thus becomes incapable, in principle, of rationally monitoring her fundamental commitments. An individual who keeps her fundamental commitments in good standing is open to scrutinizing them (after dialogue) on her own, while the person exhibiting epistemic myopia shows no such openness. Dragos further suggests that there is some evidence from neuroscience to support the idea that humans are susceptible to epistemic myopia, though there is action we can take to combat it.

In Chapter 12, “Intellectual Autonomy and its Vices,” Alessandra Tanesini presents and motivates an account of epistemic autonomy that is focused on answerability. Tanesini argues that the value that comes from being epistemically autonomous obtains only when others recognize you as being answerable for your beliefs. When seen as answerable for her beliefs, an epistemic agent is viewed as an informant, rather than a mere source of information. Tanesini argues that social oppression can prevent individuals from being seen as answerable for their beliefs, and that it thereby deprives them of the value of being epistemically autonomous agents. Further, such conditions can also cause a reduction in one’s autonomy by eroding away one’s self-trust. So, oppressive conditions foster the development of both the epistemic vices of hyper-autonomy in privileged individuals, and of heteronomy in those who are subordinated.

In Chapter 13, “Gaslighting, Humility, and the Manipulation of Rational Autonomy,” Javier González de Prado presents an integrated picture of rational autonomy and intellectual humility. According to this picture, rational autonomy is the capacity to deliberate while responding to considerations one sees as reasons, and only to such considerations. As such, when an agent has significant doubts about her competence in treating some consideration as a reason, this consideration is not accessible to her as a reason in deliberation. So, when someone misleads an individual into doubting her reasons-responsiveness, they manipulate that individual’s rational autonomy and can cause her to lose access to some of her reasons. Gaslighting, de Prado argues, is one particularly vivid example of how one’s rational autonomy can be manipulated in this way.

*IV: Epistemic Autonomy and Social Epistemology*

As mentioned above, recent epistemology has witnessed an explosion in social epistemology. Social epistemology is epistemology done with particular care and emphasis placed on the social aspects of our ability to gather and disseminate knowledge. Questions about the nature of testimony, trust, the significance of peer disagreement, and issues concerning epistemic injustice have all received significant attention within this literature. This emphasis on the social aspects of knowledge marks a significant move away from traditional epistemology which focuses on addressing under what conditions an individual can have knowledge. Social epistemology faces questions about the epistemic role and importance of the individual inquirer and her epistemic autonomy.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Once one is aware of their own epistemic limitations, the role of epistemic autonomy in our intellectual endeavors is far from straightforward. For nearly every topic you might be interested in, you are probably aware that someone else is in a better epistemic position on that matter than you are to know the truth of the matter. That is, on most matters you know that others have more evidence, better intellectual abilities, greater intellectual virtue, and so forth. Once you are aware of your epistemic limitations in these scenarios, in what sense, if any, should you think for yourself? If you are interested in the truth on some matter and are aware of someone who is better positioned to determine the truth on the matter, then it seems as though you should instead rely on that person’s intellectual abilities. This is because doing so is more likely to get you the truth. Deference in many cases like this seems perfectly appropriate. It is appropriate for me to defer to a botanist as to whether a given tree is an elm. It is appropriate for me to defer to a chemist as to the chemical composition of caffeine. Insisting on figuring these things out for oneself would be both cumbersome and a waste of time given the efforts of others have already been invested in these inquiries.[[18]](#footnote-18)

However, an intellectual life where one outsources nearly all of their intellectual projects also seems far from ideal. It is important to think through some things for yourself. Along these lines, a number of philosophers have found something amiss with moral deference – taking on a moral belief simply on someone else’s say-so.[[19]](#footnote-19) But such problems with deference do not seem limited to morality. Believing that God does/does not exist or that we do/do not have free will without thinking about these matters for oneself at all seems deeply problematic. While Socrates’ famous dictum “an unexamined life is not worth living” might be too strong, surely examining such questions for oneself adds *some* kind of value to your life. This is the basis of a liberal arts education. These considerations lead to difficult questions regarding epistemic autonomy and its relation to social epistemology. How should we balance our epistemic endeavors? When, and why, should we think for ourselves, and when, and why, should we defer to others?[[20]](#footnote-20)

These issues become even more pressing in light of disagreement. According to prominent views about the epistemic significance of disagreement, it is irrational to hold on to a belief in the face of acknowledged extensive controversy on the matter.[[21]](#footnote-21) On such views of disagreement, it becomes all the more puzzling as to why people should think about life’s most fundamental questions for themselves, given their awareness of the controversy surrounding them. If the existence of extensive controversy surrounding issues like God’s existence, the nature of free will, and the ethics of eating meat prevents one from emerging from their own inquiry on these matters with a justified belief, then what good is it for people to think about these things at all? If coming to a justified answer is off the table, then why bother?

Finally, considerations related to epistemic injustice add a third set of puzzles concerning epistemic autonomy. In this literature, philosophers have pointed out the prevalence of problematic credibility misattributions. Testimonial injustice occurs when an individual is harmed as a knower because they are either given a credibility deficit or others are given a credibility excess. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when an individual lacks the epistemic resources to interpret and express their experiences. Both types of injustice raise issues with epistemic autonomy. Issues related to hermeneutical injustice make clear the need for collaborative practices to better equip knowers. The problems raised by hermeneutical injustice make clear a need to rely on others to better make sense of one’s own experiences. Testimonial injustice also makes evident the pitfalls of relying on our own credibility assessments of others. Given that we are prone to all kinds of prejudice and bias, ‘thinking for yourself’ may seem to actually be detrimental to your epistemic well-being. In addition, while independent thinking may be essential for escaping contexts of epistemic oppression (Grasswick 197), it may also further marginalize oppressed groups by not instantiating the kind of trust exhibited in deference.[[22]](#footnote-22)

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In Chapter 14, “Epistemic Autonomy for Social Epistemologists: the Case of Moral Inheritance,” Sarah McGrath identifies an apparently inconsistent triad: (i) we inherit much of our knowledge in certain domains unreflectively, particularly from testimony; (ii) there is an autonomy requirement on moral knowledge that doesn’t exist in other domains; (iii) the standard for knowledge is the same across domains. McGrath argues that this triad is not inconsistent because the autonomy requirement is really about moral agency, not moral knowledge. In order for an agent to do the right thing she must be acting for the right-making features of the action in question. This means that she cannot unreflectively act on the testimony of others.

In Chapter 15, “Epistemic Autonomy and the Right to Confident,” Sanford Goldberg examines an argument for epistemic autonomy as an epistemic ideal, where epistemic autonomy is understood as intellectual self-reliance. This argument grounds the alleged ideal of epistemic autonomy in having the right to be confident. Having motivated the argument, Goldberg shows how it fails. In fact, Goldberg argues that being epistemically autonomous can actually be in conflict with having the right to be confident. This tension arises from our legitimate expectations of each other and how we manage our intellectual lives. The problem is that epistemic agents can be ignorant of the expectations that others appropriately have of them. Goldberg argues that such agents have no right to be confident, despite meeting all the conditions of epistemic autonomy understood as epistemic self-reliance.

In Chapter 16, “We Owe it to Others to Think for Ourselves,” Finnur Dellsén confronts the puzzle of why we should think for ourselves once we realize that others are typically in a better epistemic position to figure things out. Dellsén explores, and rejects, two ‘egotistic’ solutions to the puzzle which claim that thinking for yourself is epistemically beneficial to the subject. The first proposed egotistic answer appeals to the epistemic value of understanding, and the second to the epistemic benefits of disagreement. Having rejected these egotistic solutions, Dellsén proposes an altrustic solution to the puzzle. According to this altruistic solution, thinking for yourself is epistemically valuable when, and insofar as, it increases the reliability of consensus opinions. Since an increased reliability of consensus opinions is valuable to society at large, the epistemic benefit of epistemic autonomy is directed at others.

In Chapter 17, “Epistemic Self-Government and Trusting the Word of Others: Is there a Conflict?” Elizabeth Fricker explores the *prima facie* tension between epistemic self-governance and trust in others’ testimony. Fricker develops an account of epistemic self-governance as forming one’s beliefs in accordance with suitable evidence, and she develops and analytic account of trust that characterizes the trust a recipient places in a speaker when she forms belief from taking their word on some matter. She argues that there is no conflict between these epistemic goods since trust, particularly in testimony, can be based in evidence of the speaker’s trustworthiness. When so based, it does not compromise the speaker’s intellectual self-governance.

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1. https://jmp.princeton.edu/announcements/some-thoughts-and-advice-our-students-and-all-students [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For instance, Descartes (1628) forbids inquiring minds from relying on the ideas of others. (13) Locke (1689) claims that the opinions of others do not grant us knowledge even when they are true. (23). Kant identifies intellectual immaturity as the inability to use your own understanding without the aid of another. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ebels-Duggan (2014), Elgin (2013), and Nussbaum (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Huemer (2005) notes the following quotes from leading introduction to philosophy texts (among others):

“In this conversation, all sides of an issue should receive a fair hearing, and then you, the reader, should make up your own minds on the issue. (Pojman 1991, 5)

“My hope is that exposure to this argumentative give-and-take will encourage students to take part in the process themselves, and through this practice to develop their powers of philosophical reasoning. (Feinberg 1996, xi)” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See McMyler, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. C.A.J Coady (2002) has a similar conception of intellectual autonomy, seeing it comprised of three elements: i) independence (freedom from interference and domination), ii) self-creation (freedom to make and shape their own distinctive intellectual life by ordering their intellectual priorities), and iii) integrity (standing up for truth). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a discussion see List and Pettit (2004) and Ranalli (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See List and Pettit (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Elgin (2015) for an argument that our epistemic success is significantly dependent upon our intellectual community. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Driver (2006), McGrath (2009), and Hills (2009; 2013) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Coady (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See also Fricker (2006) for an argument that autonomy is compatible with dependence. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Dellsen (2018) for an argument that groups of experts do better when they are autonomous in what they accept and Hazlett (2015) for an argument that autonomous voting beliefs are socially beneficial. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Hills (2009) as well as Zagzebski (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In fact, Kyla Ebels-Duggan (2014) sees epistemic autonomy as being comprised of intellectual humility and the intellectual virtue of charity. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Elgin (2013; 2015), Elzinga (2019), Grasswick (2018) and Vega-Encabo (2008) for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is worth pointing out that epistemic autonomy does not rule out relying on others. For instance, Hazlett gives the helpful analogy of someone standing on a friend’s shoulders to see if Robinson has stolen second base. The subject here relies on his friend to get his belief, but not in any way that compromises his autonomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Further, epistemic autonomy may be committed to an overly individualistic conception of knowledge itself. See Code (1991) and Grasswick (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Crisp (2014), Enoch (2014), Hills (2009, 2013), Hopkins (2007), McGrath (2009), and Mogensen (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There are also difficult questions concerning how a novice can identify an expert. See Goldman (2001) for the central statement of the puzzle. For discussion, see Cholbi (2007), Coady (2006), Collins and Evans (2007), and Nguyen (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006), and Matheson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Fricker (2009) and Hazlett (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)