

Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij

Epistemic Paternalism: A Defence.

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The latest work by Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij is devoted to the defense of so-called *epistemic paternalism*, but before explaining what epistemic paternalism means, the author specifies that epistemology, according to a long standing tradition, is not merely normative, because “one of epistemology’s main mission is to provide hands-on advice, aiding the epistemic inquirer in her pursuits. Thus understood, epistemology is not only *normative*, in the sense that it concerns itself with specifically epistemic goods – goods like true belief, knowledge, understanding and so on – but also *ameliorative*, in that it attempts to say something constructive about how our chances of actually attaining the relevant goods may be increased” (p 1). Historically speaking, according to Ahlstrom-Vij three outstanding western philosophers apply an ameliorative epistemology: John Locke, René Descartes and John Stuart Mill.

But, what does epistemic paternalism consists of? It consists of the idea “that we are sometimes justified in interfering with the inquiry of another for her own epistemic good without consulting her on the issue” (p. 4).

In the first chapter, entitled “Why We Cannot Rely on Ourselves for Epistemic Improvement” and in the second one entitled “Epistemic Paternalism Defined,” Ahlstrom-Vij provides an explanation of what epistemic paternalism is, while in chapter five, entitled “Justifying Epistemic Paternalism,” and in chapter 6, entitled “Epistemic Paternalism Defended,” he states that there are also some fields where epistemic paternalism is applied. In fact, according to Ahlstrom-Vij, epistemic paternalism “might just be *widely applicable*” (p. 138).

But what are these three fields of application that Ahlstrom-Vij takes into account? The author turns his gaze to these three fields: law, experimental randomization in medical research and clinical diagnosis and prognosis.

As concerns the law, according to FRE, that is to say Federal Rules of Evidence, “the mere fact that a piece of evidence is relevant, in that it makes the relevant hypothesis about guilt either more or less likely, is not a sufficient condition for presenting it to a jury” (p. 138), because “in addition to relevance, legal practice also takes into account whether jurors are able to *gauge* that relevance properly” (ibid.).

In the case of medical research Ahlstrom-Vij states that “the practice of requiring that medical scientists use experimental randomization in collecting information about causal relationships” can be conceived as an epistemically paternalistic practice because “it involves an interference with scientists’ ability to collect information in whatever they see fit” (p. 162).

The same thing happens with the clinical settings, because “when mandating the use of prediction models, we are doing several things. For one thing, we are imposing an external

constraint on (in this case) clinicians' ability to collect information in whatever they see fit" (p. 170).

According to Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij there are three sufficient (but not necessary) conditions for making an epistemic practice a paternalistic one: the interference condition, the non-consulting condition and the improvement condition.

In fact "one central feature of a paternalistic practice is that it constitutes an interference with the doings of another for her own goods" (p. 40); this is what constitutes the interference condition. Furthermore, "it seems that what makes a practice paternalistic is not that those interfered with are objecting, but rather that they neither are nor have been *consulted* on the issue" (p. 43); this is the so-called non-consulting condition, while the improvement condition "spells out what it is to do something for someone's good, and specifically for someone's *epistemic* good" (p. 48).

Nonetheless, epistemic paternalism has been criticized in many ways, first of all because it can violate so-called epistemic autonomy but, as Ahlstrom-Vij states, "we depend on our colleagues for information and results that we have neither the time nor the expertise to generate or replicate. In the great majority of cases, the cost of epistemic autonomy would therefore be an inability to expand our epistemic horizons beyond our individual and often narrow epistemic perspectives" (p. 94). In this sense, epistemically paternalistic interventions "are not designed to tell people *what* to believe, but *how* to come to believe things" (p. 95).

In short, Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij with this book tries to overcome the strict-minded conception according to which epistemology is only normative because, as he tried to demonstrate, it can also be ameliorative and this book can be a very good starting point for further analysis devoted to this topic.

Giacomo Borbone
Catania University