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Transparency, Well-Ordered Science, and Paternalism

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Should a physician tell you that you have cancer, even if she thinks this would cause you needless distress? Of course she should! How, though, should she convey that news? Imagine three, stylised options. Dr Knowsbest is certain you should have your cancer operated on, so tells you the news in a way which vividly highlights the horrors of cancer, but downplays the risk of an operation.

Dr Neutral, by contrast, simply lists all of the facts about your cancer, your prognosis, your possible treatment options, their likely benefits and risks and so on. Finally, Dr Sensitive reports only those aspects of your condition and those risks of surgery which she judges that you, given your values and interests, would want to know about.

### **Many Methods to Reveal**

We can, I hope, all agree that Dr Knowsbest's communicative strategies and choices are ethically problematic, because she acts in a paternalistic manner. By contrast, Dr Neutral does not act paternalistically. In this regard, at least, Dr Neutral's strategies are ethically preferable to Dr Knowsbest's strategies. What about the choice between Knowsbest and Sensitive? In one sense, Dr Sensitive acts paternalistically, because she controls and structures the flow of information with the aim of improving your well-being.

However, there is an important difference between Dr Sensitive and Dr Knowsbest; the former aims solely to improve your epistemic well-being, such that you can better make a choice which aligns with your own values, whereas the latter aims to influence or override your judgment. Knowsbest's "moral paternalism" is wrong for reasons which are absent in the case of Sensitive's "epistemic paternalism" (Ahlstrom-Vij, 2013).

Therefore, plausibly, both the Neutral and Sensitive strategies are ethically preferable to Knowsbest; What, though, of the choice between these two communicative strategies? First, I am not certain that it is even possible to report all the facts in a neutral way (for more, see below.) Second, even if it is possible, Dr Sensitive's strategy seems preferable; her strategy, if successful, positively promotes - as opposed to merely failing to interfere with - your ability to make autonomous choices.

At least at an abstract, ideal level, then, we have good reason to want informants who do more than merely list facts, but who are sensitive to their audiences' epistemic situation and abilities and their evaluative commitments; we want experts who "well-lead" us. In my recent paper in *Social Epistemology*, I argued that that certain widely-endorsed norms for science communication are, at best, irrelevant, and, at worst, dangerous (John 2018). We should be against transparency, openness, sincerity and honesty.

### **It's a Bit Provocative**

One way of understanding that paper is as following from the abstract ideal of sensitive communication, combined with various broadly sociological facts (for example, about how audiences identify experts). I understand why my article put Moore in mind of a paradigm

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case of paternalism. However, reflection on the hypothetical example suggests we should also be against "anti-paternalism" as a norm for science communication; not because Knowsbest's strategy is fine, but, rather, because the term "paternalism" tends to bundle together a wide range of practices, not all of which are ethically problematic, and some of which promote - rather than hinder - audiences' autonomy.

Beyond the accusation of paternalism, Moore's rich and provocative response focuses on my scepticism about transparency. While I argued that a "folk philosophy of science" can lead audiences to distrust experts who are, in fact, trustworthy, he uses the example of HIV-AIDS activism to point to the epistemic benefits of holding scientists to account, suggesting that "it is at least possible that the process of engaging with and responding to criticism can lead to learning on both sides and the production, ultimately, of better science". I agree entirely that such a dynamic is possible; indeed, his example shows it does happen!

However, conceding this possibility does not show that we must endorse a norm of transparency, because, ultimately, the costs may still be greater than the benefits. Much here depends on the mechanisms by which transparency and engagement are enacted. Moore suggests one model for such engagement, *via* the work of "trust proxies", such as ACT-UP. As he acknowledges, however, although proxies may be better-placed than lay-people to identify when science is flawed, we now create a new problem for the non-expert: to adapt a distinction from Goldman's work, we must decide which "putative proxies" are "true proxies" (Goldman, 2001).

Plausibly, this problem is even harder than Goldman's problem of distinguishing the "true experts" among the "putative experts"; because in the latter case, we have some sense of the credentials and so on which signal expertness. Again, I am tempted to say, then, that it is unclear that transparency, openness or engagement will necessarily lead to better, rather than worse, socio-epistemic outcomes.

### **Knowledge From Observation and Practice**

Does that mean my arguments against transparency are in the clear? No. First, many of the issues here turn on the empirical details; maybe careful institutional design can allow us to identify trustworthy trust-proxies, whose work promotes good science. Second, and more importantly, the abstract model of sensitive communication is an ideal. In practice, it is easy to fail to meet this ideal, in ways which undermine, rather than respect or promote, hearers' autonomy.

For example, rather than tailor her communication to what her audiences do care about, Dr Sensitive might tailor what she says to what she thinks they ought to care about; as a result, she might leave out information which is relevant to their choices given their values, while including information which is irrelevant. An influential strain in recent philosophy of science suggests that non-epistemic value judgments do and must run deep in practices of justification; as such, even a bald report of what a study showed may, implicitly, encode or endorse value judgments which are not shared by the audience (Douglas, 2000).

Reporting claims when, and only when, they meet a certain confidence level may, for example, implicitly rely on assumptions about the relative disvalue of false positives and false negatives; in turn, it may be difficult to justify such assumptions without appeal to non-epistemic values (John, 2015). As such, even Dr Neutral may be unable to avoid communicating in ways which are truly sensitive to her audience's values. In short, it may be hard to handover our epistemic autonomy to experts without also handing over our moral autonomy.

This problem means that, for research to be trustworthy, requires more than that the researchers' claims are true, but that they are claims which are, at least, neutral and, at best, aligned with, audiences' values. Plausibly, regardless greater engagement and transparency may help ensure such value alignment. One might understand the example of ACT-UP along these lines: activist engagement ensured that scientists did “good science” not only in a narrow, epistemic sense of “good” – more or more accurate data and hypotheses were generated – but in a broader sense of being “well-ordered”, producing knowledge that better reflected the concerns and interests of the broader community (Kitcher, 2003).

Whether engagement improves epistemic outcomes narrowly construed is a contingent matter, heavily dependent on the details of the case. By contrast, engagement may be necessary for science to be “well-ordered”. In turn, transparency may be necessary for such engagement. At least, that is the possibility I would push were I to criticise my own conclusions in line with Moore’s concerns.

### **A Final Sting**

Unfortunately, there is a sting in the tail. Developing effective frameworks for engagement and contestation may require us to accept that scientific research is not, and cannot be, fully “value free”. To the extent that such an assumption is a commitment of our “folk philosophy of science”, then developing the kind of rigorous engagement which Moore wants may do as much to undermine, as promote, our trust in true experts. Moore is surely right that the dynamics of trust and distrust are even more complex than my paper suggested; unfortunately, they might be even more complex again than he suggests.

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