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Epistemic Paternalism, Averroes, and Religious Knowledge

Abstract: Epistemic paternalism occurs when evidence is withheld or shaped in particular ways in order to help an agent arrive at the truth, but this is done without their consent (and sometimes without their knowledge). While general defenses of epistemic paternalism are garnering more attention in the recent literature, little has been said regarding the practice in religious contexts. We explore a defense of epistemic paternalism in religious settings inspired by the work of the medieval Islamic philosopher Averroes. According to Averroes, epistemic paternalism is permissible in cases where it would help a layperson arrive at religious knowledge via imagination because they are incapable of arriving at it by demonstration. We conclude by explaining how the distinction between imagination can be used to justify epistemic paternalism in contemporary settings.

1. Introduction

While Alvin Goldman's paper, "Epistemic Paternalism: Communication Control in Law and Society" (1991) was one of the first inquiries into epistemic paternalism, it's only fairly recently that it has received more attention (Jackson forthcoming; Bernal and Axtell 2020; Ahlstrom-Vij 2013; Pritchard 2013). We can define epistemic paternalism, roughly as: If agent X is going to make a doxastic decision concerning question Q, and agent Y has control over the evidence that is provided to X, then, there are instances when Y need not make available to X all of the evidence relevant to Q if doing so will make X more likely to believe the truth about Q (Removed; see also Goldman 1991). While many defenses of epistemic paternalism rely on the idea that it promotes positive veritistic results, we will show such defenses can be leveraged to apply to (certain) cases of knowledge.

The topic of epistemic paternalism in religious contexts has received almost no attention in the literature. One reason for this might be the implicit assumption that defenses of epistemic paternalism will apply equally to all domains. For example, inasmuch as a defense of it applies to jurors it will also apply in religious contexts. However, we're going to explore a defense of epistemic paternalism that is particularly applicable in cases of religious knowledge. We rely on a distinction made by the medieval Islamic philosopher, Averroes—that is, between knowledge by demonstration and knowledge by imagination. After explaining this defense, we show how it can be applied to contemporary cases of religious belief formation and why it may or may not apply to other domains. We conclude by noting that the part of the reason for this is that the justification is at least partly religious, not purely epistemic. However, we're in good company as it turns out that most defenses of epistemic paternalism aren't purely epistemic either.

2. Contemporary Defenses of Epistemic Paternalism

Defenses of paternalism typically assume (if only implicitly) the following two epistemic norms: veritism and epistemic consequentialism. Veritism is the view that the final epistemic good is seeking truth and avoiding error, while epistemic consequentialism "is the view that epistemic goods are more fundamental than epistemic obligations—what you epistemically ought to do is promote certain epistemic goods" (Jackson forthcoming). It seems that in the current literature veritism and epistemic consequentialism often go hand in hand. However, we think that the defenses of epistemic paternalism we're about discuss can apply equally to cases of knowledge. Finally, while Liz Jackson suggests that there are more neutral ways to characterize epistemic paternalism, and we don't deny this, such characterizations won't be our focus here (Jackson forthcoming).

Goldman offers one of the first defenses of epistemic paternalism by describing a number of examples meant to offer it intuitive support. The paternalistic rules around advertising, curriculum design, legal evidence are designed to promote positive veritistic outcomes. For example, the justification for controlling

the sort of evidence jurors can access is epistemic; it's to help them arrive at the correct verdict (Goldman 1991, 118-119). Ahlstrom-Vij has added to veritistic defenses of epistemic paternalism by suggesting there is at least some empirical support for it (2013). Humans suffer from a number of cognitive biases and sometimes heuristics are quite harmful too. The fact that we suffer from these flaws in reasoning can sometimes justify epistemic paternalism. For we often underestimate just how much ourselves (not just others) are prone to bias and hence can lack motivation to correct them (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013, 16). Finally, even if we are sufficiently motivated to correct these mistakes in our reasoning it turns out to be very difficult to make the appropriate adjustments (Ahlstrom-Vij 2013, 16). Epistemic paternalism is one method to counteract the pernicious effects of biases and heuristics. Notice that both Goldman's and Ahlstrom-Vij's defenses can be used to justify paternalism in (at least some) cases where the epistemic goal in question is knowledge.

3. Averroes on Epistemic Paternalism

We now turn to Averroes' defense of epistemic paternalism in his short treatise, *Faṣl al-maqāl*.[1] As we will see, he offers a unique account of the conditions under which paternalism might be justified on (partially) the grounds that it can help lead to knowledge—albeit for different reasons than the abovementioned contemporary defenses have considered thus far.

3.1 The problem in *Fasl al-maqal*

The passage at issue in the *Fasl al-maqal* is Averroes' well-known interpretation of a *hadith* in which an unnamed woman announces that God is "in the sky":

[1] All citations of the *Fasl al-maqal* are drawn from Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, trans. G.F. Hourani, reprinted in J. McGinnis and D.C. Reisman (eds.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: an Anthology of Sources* (2007, 309–30). In-text citations use the abbreviation "*FM*," along with a section number.

> [T]he Prophet, peace on him, said in the case of the […] woman, when she told him that God was in the sky, "Free her, for she is a believer." (*FM*, 45)

A difficulty arises because, for Averroes, it is not literally true that God is "in the sky." God is wholly immaterial, after all, and therefore lacks spatio-temporal location altogether. So, strictly speaking, the woman's announcement appears to be false: it is not, in fact, true that God is in the sky. And yet, the Prophet's response to the woman is clearly one of approval, even to the extent that he counts the announcement as a sign of her faithfulness.

Now, as a pious Muslim,[2] Averroes obviously cannot say that the *hadith* or the Prophet himself is somehow mistaken in this assessment of the woman's announcement. Nor can he countenance the position that a false belief could somehow be a sign of true faith (see discussion in Faizi 2016). So the question arises: how can this woman's apparently false announcement be a sign of her true faith?

Averroes' answer belies his commitment to pluralism about assent:

> This [the Prophet's approval] was because she was not of the demonstrative class; and the reason for his decision was that the class of people to whom assent comes only through the imagination, that is, who do not assent to a thing except in so far as they can imagine it, find it difficult to assent to the existence of a being that is unrelated to any imaginable thing. (*FM*, 45)

As this passage evidences, Averroes distinguishes different "classes" of persons (demonstrative, dialectical and rhetorical) according to their cognitive abilities and education. As Faizi (2016, 10) observes, the distinctive feature of membership in one of these classes "lies in the specific kind of assent and conceptualization they have the capacity to generate." In other words, as members of the demonstrative class, those with requisite training in Aristotelian science have the ability and (correlative *responsibility*) to

[2] Deborah Black (2009) notes that it is important to understand this passage in light of Averroes' "pastoral" concern for unbelievers, as opposed to merely an elitist expression of contempt.

form concepts, understand their entailments, and assent according to principles of scientific demonstration (*burhan*). By contrast, as Averroes' example of the faithful woman illustrates, those belonging to non-demonstrative classes have no such ability; rather, they are limited to assent "only through the imagination" (*al-taṣdīq illa min qibal al-taḫayyul*). Whereas demonstrative assent implies among other things a properly *intellectual* apprehension of "the object itself" under consideration, imaginative assent may involve merely a "symbol" of the object (*FM*, 54). We elaborate on this distinction in Section 3.2 below.

It is precisely this point—namely, a distinction in terms of *kinds of assent*—that underlies Averroes' epistemic paternalism. In short, says Averroes, "correcting" the woman about God's lack of spatio-temporal location is not recommended. In fact, it is rejected as potentially disastrous:

> To explain the inner [i.e., demonstrative] meaning to people unable to understand it is to destroy their belief in the apparent [i.e., imaginative] meaning without putting anything in its place. The result is unbelief in learners and teachers. (*FM*, 59)

According to Averroes, for someone who is not in a position to understand why God is not in a place, the confusion that is likely to follow upon the scientific correction of her naïvely imaginative judgment may weaken or even destroy what was otherwise a healthy belief in God. There is a sense in which the corrector is playing a causal role in the believer's loss of true faith.[3] This is a disastrous result in religious terms, to say the least. But, importantly for our thesis, for Averroes it is also bad in *epistemic* terms because she might lose her (true) belief that God exists.

To recap, then: Averroes affirms a brand of epistemic paternalism that recommends against the correction of someone who appears to judge falsely just in case she is (for whatever reason) incapable of demonstrative assent regarding the subject at hand. Insofar as the woman is only capable of *imaginative*

[3] Averroes (*FM*, 47–48) famously criticizes Al-Ghazali and "many of the Sufis," who illicitly "combine the two interpretations of the passages," thereby "[causing] confusion among the people."

assent—an assent upon which her knowledge of God is founded—not only is it not recommended that such a correction be given, to offer it is to "[commit] an offense against the Law and against philosophy" (*FM*, 50).

3. 2 Imaginative and Demonstrative Assent

Averroes is an Aristotelian, which among other things means that he is committed to a scientific methodology oriented first and foremost to the discovery of causal powers. According to this view, things in the world are formally constituted by their distinctive powers; and to correctly identify a thing's distinctive powers is to have knowledge of that thing (see Henry and Tabaczek 2017, 381). In order to understand Averroes' argument, we need to consider two powers of the human soul, in particular: namely, the powers of (1) "imagination" (*taḫayyul*) and (2) the "rational power" (*qūwā nāṭiqa*), especially as they respectively relate to the act of "assent" (*taṣdīq*). Averroes' argument for epistemic paternalism hangs upon a hierarchy of "levels of assent"[4] that follow from these powers.

Imagination for Averroes is the power by which living things "perceive what is sensible," and "judges the sensibles after their absence" (*EDA*, 59). So imagination is like sensation in that it is a power by which *particular* sights, sounds, etc. are presented to the soul (*EDA*, 67). However, unlike sensation, imagination is able to perceive such "sensibles" long after they are given in actual sense experience, e.g., in the form of memories ordreams (*EDA*, 64). For this reason, imagination is "more spiritual" (*EDA*, 62) than mere sensation, i.e., precisely because it is more *active* with respect to its object than the purely passive power of sensation.

But it is the comparison of imagination with the rational power that is more important for our purposes:

[4] The notion of "levels of assent" is drawn from Sidiropoulou (2015).

> Sensation and imagination only perceive ideas in matter . . . But the apprehension of the universal idea and quiddity is different from this, for we abstract it from matter by a certain abstraction. This is especially clear in things remote from matter, such as the line and the point. (*EDA*, 67)[5]

While imagination is active with respect to its object in the sense that it has a role in *producing* the sensibles that it perceives, it is passive in that it it is still limited to the particularity of material representation. By contrast, the rational power produces "intelligibles" (i.e., abstracted from particular matter)—even to the extent that it can perceive objects that have no spatial extension, such as a Euclidean point (*EDA*, 68).

Thus, *especially when the object considered is immaterial*, Averroes is in a position to affirm that there are "levels of assent" ordered in terms of the powers of imagination and the rational power. While of course there is a sense in which a Euclidean point can be "seen" or "imagined" (e.g., as a "dot" on a blackboard), properly speaking such an object is an "intelligible" rather than a sensible. Therefore it is *un*-imaginable in a strict sense, on account of its universality and immateriality. Importantly for our purposes, the judgment that, e.g., (1,2) is "above" (1, –2) in Euclidean space is not wrong, provided that the relevant kind of assent is *imaginative* in character. Those trained in Euclidean geometry know that this is a category mistake: Euclidean points are part-less, numerical entities, and so they are not the kinds of things that are "above" or "below" anything at all. To say as much is to make a *rational* corrective judgment—that is, a judgment concerning what is intelligible (*aqli*) rather than what is imaginable (*khiyali*).

What we have here, then, are two kinds of assent with respect to a single, immaterial object. On the one hand, Averroes certainly holds that the rational power does offer greater and perhaps even "truer" insight into the world than the imagination, on account of its unique ability to abstract from matter and its concomitant conditions. Demonstration alone secures the "identity of knower and known" that is a

[5] "*EDA*" refers to Deborah Black's (2009) unpublished translation of Averroes' *Epitome of the De anima*, which can be found at http://individual.utoronto.ca/dlblack/translations.html.

condition for "perfect" knowledge of real-world phenomena, according to Averroes (see discussion in Black 1999). However, this does not mean that acts of imaginative assent are epistemically illicit.[6] On the contrary, Averroes' remarks about the woman's faithfulness make no sense unless it is sometimes epistemically beneficial to refrain from "correcting" acts of imaginative assent—assuming that the person who would be corrected is not in a position to transcend imaginative judgment. In short, Averroes' paternalism is founded in his pluralism about assent. If we are faced with a situation in which we must choose between (a) deficient, but helpful imaginative judgments; and (b) outright confusion, then Averroes invites us to opt for (a).

If a false attribution of spatial location is what is needed to come to the truth about a given matter—e.g., that God exists; or that Euclidean points bear certain relational properties with respect to one another—then, says Averroes, So be it!.

4. Application to Contemporary Religious Epistemic Paternalism

In this final section we apply the above ideas from Averroes in order to show that they can be used to offer a unique defense of epistemic paternalism in contemporary settings. We close by addressing the objection that in appealing to religious salvation our defense isn't really epistemic.

4.1 Religious Epistemic Paternalism

We now leverage these ideas from Averroes to show that they can be used to offer a unique defense of epistemic paternalism in contemporary religious settings. Suppose a Priest is preparing a homily for her

[6] Averroes' view that imaginative judgments can be *epistemically* as well as practically beneficial resonates with contemporary "partial truth" accounts of scientific modeling (see e.g. Yablo 2014 and Levy 2015). As Levy (2015, 792) puts it, "while model descriptions are typically idealized, hence not true of their targets *simpliciter*, they are nevertheless partly true, at least when successful." Like the image of God in the sky, false model descriptions can nevertheless be epistemically beneficial insofar as they facilitate reasoning about the real world in a way that would be impossible otherwise due to relevant epistemic limitations.

next worship service. She's focusing on a particularly thorny passage of scripture that is prone to misinterpretation and confusion, especially among laypeople who lack formal theological education. The Priest realizes she has two options. First, she can refrain from any sort of epistemic paternalistic practice and attempt to explain the meaning of the passage via demonstration. She thus refrains from non-literal or metaphorical examples and attempts to explain what it literally means. Second, she can employ epistemic paternalistic practices and explain the passage imaginatively. This means using non-literal and metaphorical examples to help her lay audience grasp the main themes of the passage. The justification for employing the latter method is at least partly epistemic (we'll return to this later). The Priest should employ epistemic paternalism and appeal to imaginative judgments if her audience is more likely to reap epistemic benefits from her so doing than if she offered a demonstration. Notice that in such a case the Priest's choice is not between arriving at knowledge via demonstration or via imagination. Rather, it's between arriving at confusion via demonstration or some knowledge via imagination. We don't deny that if a demonstration can be successfully employed without epistemic harm (e.g. causing great confusion) that it ought to be used. For in such a situation the Priest would lose her justification for employing epistemic paternalism. We simply think that Averroes' distinction between demonstration and imagination offers a justification for epistemic paternalism in cases where religious knowledge is at stake (though perhaps not exclusively). We can standardize our line of argument thus far in the following way:

(1) Knowledge by demonstration is superior to partial knowledge by imagination

But,

(2) Partial knowledge by imagination is superior to epistemic harm by demonstration

And,

(3) If knowledge is superior to partial knowledge which is superior to epistemic harm

So,

(3) If Agent A reasonably believes that a demonstration about P will confuse Agent B about P then she is permitted make the case for P via imagination instead.

(4) If Agent A is permitted to employ imagination about P instead of a demonstration about P then she is permitted to practice epistemic paternalism.

Thus,

(5) Epistemic paternalism is at least sometimes permissible.

Notice that this is a general argument without reference to the religious context we've made use of thus far. Here one might object that (2) is false. Partial knowledge isn't any better than confusion. Or perhaps stronger, partial knowledge is not robust enough to justify epistemic paternalism. In other words, partial knowledge might be better than confusion but not if it comes at the cost of a paternalistic practice. We won't spend more time developing this line of objection because we think that when offered in the context of religious knowledge such worries evaporate. Consider:

(1*) Religious Knowledge by demonstration is superior to partial religious knowledge by imagination.

But,

(2*) Partial religious knowledge by imagination is superior to religious epistemic harm by demonstration.

So,

(3*) If Agent A reasonably believes that a demonstration about R will confuse Agent B and the content of R is religious, then she is permitted to practice epistemic paternalism.

(4*) If Agent A is permitted to employ imagination instead of demonstration about R then she is permitted to practice epistemic paternalism in some religious cases.

Thus,

(5*) Epistemic paternalism is permissible in cases where important religious knowledge is at stake (and where risk of epistemic harm about important religious knowledge is low).

What do we mean by 'important religious knowledge' and what makes it so special? We are assuming a particular epistemic axiology where not all religious knowledge is made equal, so to speak. Consider that it's more important to know how to prevent the spread of Covid-19 than it is to know who won the hockey game last night. The same is true in religious matters. There are heated debates about supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism and while there is presumably knowledge to be had in such cases, we don't believe such debates are as important as matters pertaining directing to salvation. We admit there may be vague cases such that it's difficult to know whether our argument will apply. However, it's safe to say that some of the very most important religious knowledge pertains to the afterlife, with other types of religious knowledge decreasing in importance until the very most obscure theological issues are at stake. Likewise, we don't intend our argument to justify unpalatable trade-offs in religious knowledge where, for example, much trivial religious knowledge is gained, while knowledge essential to salvation is lost. We think that this story coheres well with the incredibly strong intuitions that some things matter more than others.

Since our argument is about cases of important religious knowledge, we claim that even if epistemic paternalism by way of imagination isn't permitted in more general cases, the stakes are so high in the religious case that partial knowledge is indeed better than confusion. If some religious knowledge really is so important then it explains why the use of Averroes' distinction between knowledge via demonstration versus partial knowledge via imagination is a legitimate way of defending epistemic paternalism in such

cases. At this stage instead of focusing our efforts on defending the idea that religious knowledge might be particularly unique in this regard, we're going to close by addressing a different worry.

4.2 Is religious paternalism really epistemic?

The high stakes we've referred to with respect to religious knowledge (clearly, they're incredibly high for Averroes) aren't purely epistemic. Indeed, we've noted that part of the reason they're important is because one's salvation is at stake. Here one might object that this is a kind of pernicious pragmatic encroachment. The objector might insist that the defense we've offered of epistemic paternalism in religious contexts isn't purely epistemic. Yes, the individual in question is going to gain partial knowledge rather than confusion but we've justified this partial knowledge on the grounds it's connected to one's salvation. Does our argument, then, really constitute a legitimate defense of *epistemic* paternalism in religious cases?

We think that this objection fails because it turns out that there are almost no purely epistemic defenses of epistemic paternalism. For example, Liz Jackson recently argues that the distinction between epistemic paternalism and general paternalism is "much more slippery than it appears *prima facie*, or cases of epistemic paternalism are extremely rare" (forthcoming). She continues:

> Many cases in the actual epistemic paternalism literature are arguably instances of the latter. For example, consider a commonly-used case: a judge withholding evidence from a jury to raise the probability they will come to the right verdict (maybe the judge has good evidence that the jury will weigh the evidence improperly). Presumably, the judge might do this in part for the epistemic good involved (the jury's getting a true belief, justified belief, knowledge, etc.) but in real-life cases, a major part of the judge's motivation is moral: to convict the guilty and to let the innocent go free. This latter thing is only contingently connected to the jury's having true beliefs, and if (for some odd reason) the judge thought that the jury's having false beliefs would lead to convicting the guilty and the innocent going free, the judge would likely

> not be motivated to interfere in the same way. This suggests that the epistemic is not the judge's primary motive (Jackson forthcoming).

Notice that the same can be true of many other examples. Advertising rules aren't just about consumer beliefs; they're about stopping consumers from wasting their money on faulty products, etc. Informing kids about the perils of drug use isn't just epistemic; it's to get them to refrain from drug use (Jackson forthcoming). Jackson argues that it turns out that cases of pure epistemic paternalism – where the motivation for paternalism is purely epistemic – are incredibly rare. Jackson concludes that "[t]his isn't great news for those working on epistemic paternalism, because it means that (i) real-life cases of epistemic paternalism are virtually non-existent , and (ii) many of the literature's supposed examples of epistemic paternalism, such as the cases of juries in courtrooms, are not actually cases of epistemic paternalism" (forthcoming). We disagree. Instead we think that this simply shows epistemic paternalism turns out to usually be motivated by both epistemic and non-epistemic reasons. What makes it different from general types of paternalism? The fact that it is motivated in part by epistemic reasons.[7]

Jackson isn't sympathetic to this suggestion because (i) it moves away from the current literature; (ii) the epistemic component may matter very little (e.g. moral issues are much weightier in the courtroom, etc.) and; (iii) the epistemic component is often only instrumentally valuable (e.g. stop us from buying faulty products) (forthcoming). We don't see these as particularly worrying for our argument either. So be it if the literature to date has failed to recognize that most cases of epistemic paternalism aren't 'pure'. In the religious cases we're concerned with, the epistemic component matters more than a very little since it is intertwined with the issue of religious salvation.[8] Finally, that the epistemic component here is

[7] Admittedly, it might make sense to classify cases where the epistemic motivation is incredibly small as non-epistemic. Even if this is so it wouldn't falsify our general claim that the kind of cases we are concerned with, and the kind we think makes best sense to categorize as epistemic, contain both epistemic and non-epistemic motivations.

[8] There is a growing literature on the nature of religious faith in contemporary philosophy of religion. A number of philosophers now deny that in order to have faith that P it is necessary to believe that P. Since belief is a component

instrumentally valuable seems to be a feature rather than a bug of the view. While Jackson shows that our defense of epistemic paternalism in religious cases isn't purely epistemic, it seems that we're in good company here.

4.3 Fundamental Worldview Beliefs

We've employed Averroes in the service of defending epistemic paternalism in contemporary religious settings where the knowledge at stake is important. However, it's fair to wonder whether this defense can be extended beyond the religious domain. Are there other subjects where it is appropriate to appeal to the distinction between demonstration and imagination in order to justify epistemic paternalism? We think part of the reason (2*) is true is because of the high stakes of some types of religious belief. In the above we noted that one easy way to identify which religious beliefs are important enough to have our argument apply to them is to simply ask whether they are necessarily connected to issues of salvation. However, there's another plausible strategy for identifying areas of importance that would allow us to expand the application of our argument beyond issues of salvation. Consider that religious beliefs are typically quite fundamental to an individual's worldview. Suppose we understand a worldview as a sort of Quinean web of beliefs. Beliefs in the center of the web are (i) very important to one's personal identity and (ii) interconnected to all (or most) of one's other beliefs. If beliefs in the middle change, then in some sense one's identity changes along with a whole host of other beliefs outside the center of the web. Consider how much sense this analogy makes of dramatic religious conversions. This expands the scope of importance from 'salvation' to something like 'fundamental worldview' or 'essential to personal identity'.

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of knowledge it appears as if our argument here is inconsistent with non-doxastic accounts of faith. However, we could rephrase much of the argument to fit non-doxastic accounts of faith. For instance, one could employ paternalistic practices to get someone else to accept or hope that P. We wont' discuss this issue further here.

We think that the more central the beliefs in question are to one's worldview the stronger the justification for employing imagination. Notice that a significant part of the justification here is epistemic. The central beliefs of an individual's worldview justify and explain other less important beliefs. It is the lens through which they understand the world. It matters a great deal that we get these fundamental beliefs right. In light of these considerations, then, our defense of epistemic paternalism the religious domain may well apply to other domains. The political and moral realm are two domains that immediately come to mind. Beliefs in these areas matter a great deal to one's worldview. Two observations are in order. First, the justification for epistemic paternalism that uses imagination *comes in degrees*. By way of analogy, some beliefs are closer to the middle of the web than others. Second, in trivial matters (e.g., a perceptual belief that one forms at a very far distance from the object) the justification to use imagination in this way likely evaporates. Trivial matters just aren't important enough to justify the use of paternalism. That our defense can indeed apply to other domains, and does so indexed to the importance of the beliefs in question, is a feature of our view rather than a bug.

5. Conclusion

The distinction between knowledge by demonstration and knowledge by imagination in Averroes offers a helpful explanation as to why epistemic paternalism is permitted in at least some religious cases. In certain religious settings the stakes may be so high that partial knowledge by imagination is indeed better than confusion resulting from a demonstration. While it's true this defense isn't purely epistemic, we are in good company as it turns out that almost no cases of epistemic paternalism are purely epistemic. Finally, an upshot of our view is that it nicely explains why our defense of epistemic paternalism might apply to other domains of great importance but not to trivial matters. Much more remains to be said about the permissibility of epistemic paternalism more generally, and about its permissibility in religious cases in particular.

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