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On Epistemic Agency

Author

Kristoffer Hans Ahlstrom, *University of Massachusetts Amherst* Follow

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Hilary Kornblith

Second Advisor

Jonathan Vogel

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Christopher Meacham

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Abstract

Every time we act in an effort to attain our epistemic goals, we express our epistemic agency. The present study argues that a proper understanding of the actions and goals relevant to expressions of such agency can be used to make ameliorative recommendations about how the ways in which we actually express our agency can be brought in line with how we should express our agency. More specifically, it is argued that the actions relevant to such expressions should be identified with the variety of actions characteristic of inquiry; that contrary to what has been maintained by recent pluralists about epistemic value, the only goal relevant to inquiry is that of forming true belief; and that our dual tendency for bias and overconfidence gives us reason to implement epistemically paternalistic practices that constrain our freedom to exercise agency in substantial ways. For example, we are often better off by gathering only a very limited amount of information, having our selection of methods be greatly restricted, and spending our time less on reflecting than on simply reading off the output of a simple algorithm. In other words, when it comes to our freedom to express epistemic agency, more is not always better. In fact, less is often so much more.

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