



Treating like a child

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No one wants to be treated like a child. To be treated like a child offends our dignity—in many cases, it offends the dignity even of children. Certainly my four-year-old is not a fan of it, especially when his sister is the one doing the treating. Paternalism is often glossed as treating someone as a child, and many of the most illuminating discussions of the nature and moral significance of paternalism draw on an understanding of the distinction between children and adults and the fact that paternalism is *not* always wrong when directed toward children, in order to explain why paternalism *is* wrong, when directed toward adults.

In this paper, I will be concerned to defend the flat-footed dictionary thesis that paternalism is not a matter of treating someone like a child, but rather a matter of treating someone like you are *their parent*. On this *relational* conception of paternalism, morally justifiable paternalism cannot be understood solely in terms of the status of the subject of paternalistic treatment, but rather must be accounted for in terms of the *relationship* between the subject and the paternalistic agent. As a result, the account requires no sharp adult/child distinction in order to make sense of the boundaries of justifiable paternalism, giving it an attractively continuous treatment of human development. In contrast to other developmental accounts, such as the influential account of Schapiro (1999), my account will also not draw any sharp lines between *domains* of appropriate paternalism toward children.

The key ingredient in the relational account of paternalism that I will defend is my substantive explanation of *why* parenthood is the right kind of relationship to ground the appropriateness of some kinds of treatment that would otherwise be objectionable. On my account, this is because parenthood belongs to a class of committed, forward-looking relationships of *influence*. Objectionable paternalism interferes with agential autonomy, and autonomy is self-governance. But in committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, the parties to the relationship have the power to cause and constitute one another as persons. Hence, they have the power to cause and constitute which actions comport with someone's self—and hence which turn out to have been autonomous. To the extent that a relationship is committed and forward-looking, therefore, and to the extent that it involves influence, there will be room for unobjectionable¹ paternalism—paradigmatically, but not exclusively, in the treatment of young children by their parents.

¹I'll save the important caveats about room for objections remaining so long as those objections do not interfering with autonomy for section 5.

1 | PATERNALISM

Throughout this paper, I will work with a broad understanding of what kinds of treatment can count as paternalistic, in the very broadest sense. Paternalism is sometimes defined more narrowly than I do. According to Gerald Dworkin's treatment in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for example,

Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm. (Dworkin 2017)

This is too narrow for my purposes in several respects. For one, paternalistic treatment can be performed not only by individuals and by the state, but by groups and other corporate actors. So we should not restrict our definition to interference by states or by individuals.

For another, paternalistic treatment need not be contrary to an agent's will. As a parent, I might offer my children the reward of dessert if they finish their vegetables, and when I do, I treat them paternalistically, seeking to influence their behavior toward outcomes that I take to be better for them and which I could not otherwise achieve, but my offer of dessert is not unwelcome—on the contrary, it works precisely because they do welcome it.² Nor is “interference” required, in any strict sense, in the case of paternalistic offers like my offer of dessert to my children. Exercises of paternalism like this one seek to influence behavior without interfering with it directly, in any intuitive sense.

Treatment can also be paternalistic even if the actor is merely taking a gamble on its prospect to be better off for the subject of paternalistic treatment and does not judge outright that the outcome of that gamble will be successful. Indeed, there may be independently objectionable features of paternalism that turns on prospects rather than sure assessments of what will happen. So we should not require of paternalistic treatment that it be motivated by the judgment that it will make its subject better off.

Dworkin's definition is also, in another way, too broad. Some kinds of treatment can interfere out of a judgment that they will make their subject better off, without being paternalistic. For example, if I am moved to treat you in some way because I judge it will make you better off, but not out of a desire to make you better off, but only out of a desire to win a bet about whether you would be better off, then I am not inclined to classify my treatment of you as paternalistic, even if it is unwelcome. Moreover, if I expect that without interference, you will act in an excellent way—the second-best, overall, making you very well-off, indeed—and interfere in order to make sure that you do the very best thing, instead of the second-best, I am again not inclined to classify my behavior as paternalistic. In core cases, paternalism is motivated by the judgment that but for the paternalistic intervention, you will not act well. It is motivated, in Quong's (2010) terms, by a “negative judgement about the ability of others to run their own lives” (Quong, 2010, 74).

So paternalistic behavior, as I will understand it, always involves an effort to influence the members of someone else's choice set for some decision, out of a concern that but for such influence, the

²On the importance of paternalistic offers, see Quong 2010, chapter 3).

³Quong 2010, 80).

agent in question will act in a way that is expectedly poor for them. Jonathan Quong calls his similar characterization of paternalism the *judgmental definition*.³ Paternalistic treatment can therefore include not only coercion and the elimination of options, but also cajoling, bullying, and offers of rewards. I will not assume that paternalism is wrong by definition; on the contrary, my thesis is that what is wrong about paternalism when it is wrong can be glossed with the characterization that it involves

treating someone like you are their parent when you are not.⁴ So that leaves us the key question of trying to articulate when and why paternalistic treatment is permissible or appropriate.⁵

2 | PATERNALISM AND CHILDREN

My aim in this paper is to defend a *relational* conception of the appropriate and inappropriate spheres for paternalistic treatment—a view on which the permissibility or impermissibility of paternalistic treatment is grounded in the relationship between the agent and subject of the treatment in question. So it will be most helpful, in order to appreciate the significance of this relational conception, to contrast it with what we might call *status* conceptions of paternalistic action, according to which the permissibility of paternalistic treatment is ultimately grounded in some *non*-relational fact about the subject of that treatment.

For example, Harry Brighouse writes that in contrast to the child liberationist, who thinks that paternalistic treatment of children is not, in fact, justified,

[t]he paternalist believes that there are there are morally relevant differences between adults and children that justify adults having authority over the circumstances of children. (Brighouse, 2003, 2)

Here, Brighouse characterizes the paternalist, by definition, as holding not just that paternalistic treatment of children is in some cases justified, but that this treatment is justified *by* some underlying difference in status between children and adults. Similarly, in her brilliant and influential treatment of the relationship between children and paternalistic treatment, Tamar Schapiro draws the connection between paternalism and treatment like a child even more closely, writing in her opening paragraph that.

by ‘treating someone like a child’ I mean interacting with her on the basis of more paternalistic standards than those which apply to adult-adult relations. (Schapiro, 1999, 715)

Schapiro then goes on to justify the different treatment of children on the grounds that children *are* different. In her Kantian terms, they occupy the “predicament” of not yet having a will of their own, and hence, no treatment of them can be genuinely contrary to their will.

Status-based accounts of the appropriate sphere for paternalistic treatment must overcome two obstacles. First and most obviously, they must explain what genuine difference in status grounds the appropriate difference in the permissibility of paternalistic treatment. But second and no less significantly, they must account for the apparent differences in the scope of permissible paternalistic treatment of children by their parents as compared to strangers, and for the fine texture of differences in the scope of permissible paternalistic treatment of children by a variety of others who are close to them—grandparents, godparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, coaches, and mentors. Such accounts incur the second of these burdens because they do not discriminate at a fundamental level between the

⁴Contrast the approach in Shiffrin (2000).

⁵I will focus on permissibility in what follows. Insofar as paternalistic acts are characterized by their motives, whether permissibility is the right sort of deontic category to evaluate them will depend on whether you think that the distinction between permissible and impermissible actions can be carved according to motives, as defenders of the doctrine of double effect, *inter alia*, claim, or deny this, as do some who object to the doctrine of double effect on these grounds. In what follows I’ll speak of permissibility but what I say can be re-glossed in terms of some other deontic category, if necessary.

agents of paternalistic treatment, and they incur the first burden because they *do* discriminate between children and adults.

Both of these challenges are significant. I'll take the second challenge first. If the permissibility of paternalistic treatment of children is grounded ultimately in the status of children—whether that status consists in the lack of some capacity or proficiency or instead in lacking any will that counts as their own—then the ultimate explanation of the paternalistic treatment of children does not discriminate between agents of paternalistic treatment. This means that it does not distinguish parents from strangers—or even from other children. Something else must do the distinguishing.

So proponents of status-based accounts of permissible paternalism must offer layered accounts. Perhaps although in principle paternalistic treatment of children is justified no matter who performs it, only some people have *standing* to do so, by analogy with prominent appeals to standing in the literature on moral responsibility.⁶ Or perhaps we are to think of the concept of parenthood as consisting in a social convention to invest the authority for paternalistic intervention—which would otherwise belong to everyone—in a small number of guardians for each child. Answers like these succeed at distinguishing a child's parents from complete strangers, not by grounding the permissibility of paternalistic treatment directly in relationships, but rather by layering some distinguishing feature of adults on top of the separable question of what makes children apt for paternalistic treatment in the first place.

It would take us too far beyond the scope of the present treatment to fully evaluate the prospects of such answers to our challenge, as the room for refinements and variations is vast.⁷ But distinguishing parents from strangers is only the beginning of the challenge of getting right the distribution of authority to engage in paternalistic behavior toward children. Grandparents, godparents, teachers, coaches, family friends, and others often can and do engage in paternalistic treatment toward children—restricting their choices, or offering them incentives or rewards to do what is in their own interests even when the children disagree about what those interests are.

In some of these cases, we can perhaps construe the authority to engage in paternalistic behavior as delegated. For example, a swimming coach may have the authority to create paternalistic incentives to complete a workout because they are tacitly granted that authority by a child's parents, who authorize the child's participation on the swim team. But not all paternalistic treatment by extended family can plausibly be delegated. Paternalistic incentives are sometimes offered by grandparents *contrary* to parents' wishes, for example, and swim coaches who earn children's trust over extended, invested relationships may extend their mentorship and advice—and with it, some forms of paternalistic treatment—outside the scope of swimming, toward other forms of character and life goals.⁸ The proponent of the view that extra-parental forms of paternalism are authorized only when delegated will be forced to choose between surprisingly easy ways of that delegation becoming effective and surprising limitations on the scope of paternalism by grandparents, teachers, and coaches. It is not obvious that status-based accounts cannot maneuver around these obstacles, but on the other hand, it is not obvious how they can do so, either.

⁶Compare Cohen (2006), Duff (2010), Todd (2012), Bell (2013), Watson (2013), and King (2015), *inter alia*, for discussion.

⁷Thanks to David Sussman for discussion of this issue.

⁸My own children's grandparents have helped me to better appreciate this point than I once did.

3 | LINE-DRAWING

Let us return, then, to our first, more obvious, challenge. Status-based accounts of the permissible scope of paternalism toward children must draw clean lines between adult and child. Yet, it is not clear how such a line will go. In its naïve form, the challenge is to get a clear distinction out of what looks like a smoothly continuous process. Schapiro addresses a naïve version of the challenge in “What Is A Child?”:

It is tempting to conceive of the adult-child distinction purely as a matter of degree because this picture supports the intuition that there is a continuous path from childhood to adulthood. (Schapiro, 1999, 724)

Schapiro's official answer to this challenge is that

if the task is to illuminate the content of these concepts as status concepts, the idea of greater and lesser degrees of cultivation cannot be the whole story. Masters in general are more skilled than apprentices, but being a master does not simply consist in being a skilled apprentice. To attribute a status concept is to draw something like a distinction in kind, and our question is about the meaning of concepts as they figure into that sort of attribution. (Schapiro, 1999, 725)

But this example is considerably less persuasive than the others in her paper. On the contrary, the comparison to masters and apprentices is grist for the mill of *relational* accounts of paternalism, since what makes masters different from apprentices has nothing to do with their own status, but only to do with the relational fact that they *no longer have masters*. Still, the point remains that even a process that occupies a gradient can have important cutoff points. Sneaker soles wear down slowly, but there is still a clear distinction between those with holes that socks can poke through and those without. So perhaps the key distinction between children and adults concerns some important threshold.

But the more important version of the challenge is to find a status that is widely enough shared by children toward which at least some paternalistic treatment seems to be warranted, without also applying to too many adults. Schapiro, again, is particularly perceptive about this form of the challenge, this time in a sequel paper, “Childhood and Personhood” (Schapiro, 2003). In that paper, she objects to what she calls the “proficiency argument” that children, as a class, do not share the same status as adults, and instead in favor of her own “attributability argument,” grounded in a further development and elaboration of the same account of the appropriate paternalistic treatment of children from her 1999 paper. The problem with the proficiency argument, as I understand it, is to identify what proficiencies are lacked by children that does not open up the live possibility that those proficiencies are also lacked by large numbers of competent adults.⁹

Schapiro holds that her own, attributability, account, offers a more promising way of distinguishing the status of children while leaving unquestioned scope for default anti-paternalism toward adults. Her account is more promising in this respect, because it is not grounded in any cognitive or emotional skills, which some precocious children might develop early while some adults never reach the same level of proficiency, but instead in whether children are “fully themselves,” in the very same sense in which those undergoing a depressive episode are “not fully themselves” (Schapiro, 2003, 585).

⁹Schapiro (2003), especially at pages 594, with re-emphasis at 589.

I agree with Schapiro that her attributability account is much more promising than proficiency-based status accounts—and indeed my own positive account of the permissibility of paternalistic treatment will draw on what I take to be its most important insights. But I still think that her view that what gives a child a different status than adults is that she is not fully herself—that she is “not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice that counts as hers” (Schapiro, 1999, 729)—is subject to the same problem, of overgeneralizing to adults toward whom paternalistic treatment would be inappropriate. But to see why, we will have to detour through an important concession that Schapiro makes to the continuous development of children.

This important concession is that Schapiro grants that

[t]here must also be a difference between older and younger children, for as children grow, we think it less and less appropriate to treat them paternalistically. (Schapiro, 1999, 733)

One *might* endorse a purely instrumentalist explanation of the reduced scope for paternalism as children grow and develop in the spirit of Schapiro's account, as a kind of pretense justified by allowing children to “practice” behaving autonomously, even though they do not yet have a will to count as behaving genuinely autonomously. But Schapiro's response to the intuitive reduction in the scope of permissible paternalism as a child develops is more concessive. She allows that as a child develops, he gains autonomy in what she calls “domains of discretion” one by one, getting to count as making choices that count as genuinely his own in some domains though not in others. Her justification of the scope for permissible paternalism therefore only applies outside the scope of a child's “domains of discretion,” and not within them.¹⁰

I'll set aside the fact that I'm not quite sure how to make sense of how someone could count as not fully herself with respect to some domains of choice even though she is fully herself with respect to others, or how such domains could be intelligibly distinguished from one another. Let's focus instead on the fact that Schapiro's allowance of the incremental development of domains of discretion, constitutes a way of backing off of the sharp distinction between children and adults, but only by way of bringing it back as a sharp distinction among domains of discretion.

The problem is that it is doubtful that children ever *fully* gain autonomy within any individual domain of discretion. Schapiro (2003, 577) offers the example of a father who allows his two-year-old daughter discretion over which pajamas to wear, so long as she chooses among those appropriate to the weather. And my children were certainly capable of selecting pajamas autonomously at the age of two. But being capable of choosing autonomously, and choosing autonomously with any reliability, are two quite different things, and even as they grow older, both of my children continue to have trouble making autonomous choices about pajamas when they are jealous of which color pajamas each other are wearing. Similarly, children may be capable of selecting which toy to play with autonomously even at very young ages, but circumstances may not always be favorable, and indeed in my house, the rate of coincidence of which toys the two children have decided to play with is far too high to be compatible with both having chosen autonomously. So if paternalism is permissible when it does not interfere with an agent's autonomous choice, then I don't see why it matters whether there is any domain over which an agent has nothing that would count as an autonomous choice, or merely whether there are particular choices that are not in fact autonomous.

¹⁰Schapiro 1999, 733–734).

And the idea of domains of discretion brings back our first challenge, about justifying paternalism toward children without overgeneralizing to bad cases of paternalism toward adults. Schapiro notes that.

it helps to keep in mind that we think of adolescents as people who are characteristically 'in search of themselves.' Moreover, we think of adolescents as trying to carry out this search by identifying themselves in a rather intense but provisional way with peer groups, celebrities, political movements, athletic activities, lovers, and the like. (Schapiro, 1999, 733)

So we can see that Schapiro sees the state of being "in search of oneself" as a state of not being fully formed *as* a self, and hence, on her view about the conditions of attributability, a state in which one's choices—about peer groups, celebrities, and the like—therefore cannot truly reflect that self, and hence cannot truly reflect one's will. This observation lends her contention that children—even adolescents—are in some sense not fully formed, or not yet themselves, great plausibility.

Yet, the very same observation puts pressure on whether her account again over-generates permissible paternalism. Adolescents are not the only people who are in search of themselves; this is also a frequent characterization of many people in their twenties who do not have legal guardians, qualify for their parents' health insurance, or fall under any other socially recognized sources of authority. And it is also an apt characterization of many people who find themselves in mid-life crises. If being in search of yourself makes teenagers' related life choices not truly their own and hence apt for paternalistic treatment, what prevents the same from going for the life choices of forty-something tech executives who find themselves in search of themselves?

4 | PATERNALISM AND PARENTS

In the last section, I surveyed some very high-level doubts about status-based accounts of the scope of permissible paternalism. Nothing I said was sufficient to rule out the possibility of satisfactory responses on behalf of status-based accounts, but I hope to have said enough in order for the contrast with relational accounts to emerge clearly in this section. My goal, as I have said, is to defend an account of the scope of permissible paternalism that is grounded directly in the *relationship* between the agent and subject of paternalistic treatment. My account is inspired by a particularly flat-footed dictionary reading of the roots of the word "paternalism" itself. As Amy Mullin puts the point aptly,

[s]ince the parent child relationship seems to be the linguistic source of the concept, one may be tempted to assume that raising a child represents a particularly appropriate sphere for paternalism. Mullin 2014, 413)

Now, Mullin herself goes on to focus on her arguments that paternalistic treatment has sharp limits, even within the scope of parent-child relationships. And although I think this is right as well, my focus will be fairly different. Still, my point of departure will be her observation about the connection between paternalism and parent-child relationships. Whereas Schapiro's article "What Is a Child?" can be construed as offering great insight into the scope of permissible paternalism through considering the status of children and what it is to treat someone as a child, I am going to try to shed light on the scope of permissible paternalism through considering the nature of parent-child relationships (borrowing liberally from Schapiro along the way).

If the permissibility of paternalistic treatment is grounded in the nature of parent–child relationships, then it is easy to understand, and will require no extra special explanation, why it is permissible for parents to treat their own children paternalistically in ways that it is not permissible for a stranger to treat them. For strangers do not have the same relationships with children that their parents do. More, since parent–child relationships have some important things in common with grandparent–child relationships, godparent–child relationships, teacher–child relationships, coach–child relationships, and more, it should not be surprising if a relational account of the scope of permissible paternalism has the resources to easily explain why grandparents, teachers, coaches, and others who have more attenuated relationships with children than their parents can have undelegated authority to treat children in paternalistic ways, nor why the scope for paternalistic treatment by such adults is more restricted than it is for parents, given that their relationships with children imperfectly approximate those of parents.¹¹

Relational accounts of the scope of permissible paternalism also do not require any sharp distinction between children and adults. The fact that adults are presumptively entitled not to be treated paternalistically is to be explained simply by the fact that few or no people bear relationships to them that are sufficiently similar to the relationships that parents bear to their young children. And this is quite independent of any developmental milestone, whether grounded in rational capacities or otherwise—except insofar as it is harder or less common to bear such relationships to people who have passed certain developmental milestones.

The relational account of the scope of permissible paternalism not only avoids drawing lines between children and adults, it can also avoid drawing sharp lines, as Schapiro does, between developmental domains of discretion, in order to make sense of the reduced scope for paternalism as children grow and develop. And we saw that grandparents, teachers, and coaches may have the standing to treat children paternalistically in their own right, in virtue of their own relationships with a child, insofar as those relationships resemble parental relationships. But they will arguably have less scope for permissible paternalistic treatment, insofar as their relationships are only approximations to parental relationships, and insofar as their relationship with the child is not all-encompassing. If this is so, then similarly, as a child grows and develops the parent's own relationship with the child will change. On the relational view, this grounds, and is not merely a response to, the fact that the parent has a reduced scope for paternalistic treatment of their child.

So whereas in the last two sections I have been arguing that status-based accounts of the permissibility of paternalistic treatment face challenges drawing lines between children and adults in plausible ways, challenges distinguishing among the scope for permissible paternalistic treatment by adults with varying relationships with a child, and at least in one prominent case, puzzles about the reduction in scope for permissible paternalistic treatment over child development, I have here been suggesting that relational accounts of the scope of permissible paternalism should be particularly well-situated to address each of these problems. I have not, of course, yet said which features of parent–child relationships ground permissible paternalism in this way, why those features are independent of a sharp adult/child distinction, why those features adhere in lesser degrees to other relationships children have with grandparents, teachers, and others, why those features tend to decline over time and child

¹¹Indeed, Mullin herself goes on to define “parent,” for her purposes, as applying more broadly than to either biological or adoptive parents, in any strict sense: When I speak of parents, I mean adults who are in long-term relationships with children, who interact with them regularly and closely, who accept significant ongoing responsibility for a child's care and development, and are taken by others to have this responsibility. Thus biological parents who do not interact extensively in the manner described above are not what I mean by a parent, nor are legally recognized parents who have little to do with a child. Other relatives and paid caregivers with long-term and socially recognized relationships with and responsibility for children would count as parents as I use the term [Mullin 2014, 414].

development, or why those features are more difficult to sustain in relationships between adults. I have not, in short, completed my explanation; I have only shown how the relational conception has the right shape to have very different resources than status-based accounts. So to that, we must turn in the next section.

But first, it is worth pointing out that relational conceptions of the scope of permissible paternalism have much in common with Larisa Svirsky's fascinating and illuminating relationship-based norms view of responsibility. Svirsky argues that "to be responsible for anything is always to be responsible to someone for something" (Svirsky, 2020, 2). So on her account, there can be important differences in the appropriateness of different people holding one and the same agent responsible for the same behavior that are not grounded in a single underlying status of the agent being unqualifiedly responsible, together with differences in the standing to hold her responsible—just as on my account there can be differences in the scope of when it is permissible for two adults to treat one and the same child paternalistically.

Similarly, just as I am in the course of arguing for a relational account of the scope of permissible paternalism by focusing, *inter alia*, on differences between who may treat a child paternalistically, and in what ways, Svirsky argues for her relational account of responsibility by focusing on cases in which it is appropriate for a parent to hold a child responsible, but not appropriate for a stranger to hold the child responsible, even for the very same behavior. And several of the alternative accounts that she canvasses have analogues in the case of paternalist treatment, and conversely. Given that paternalism is often taken to be permissible only in what one might call "marginal" cases of agency, including children and the impaired, and the fact that Svirsky is likewise interested in the shape of responsibility in cases of what Shoemaker has called "marginal" cases of agency, the connections between the two topics may even run deeper. But that is not a question that I will have space to fully explore, here.

5 | HOW DO RELATIONSHIPS PERMIT PATERNALISM?

My answer to how relationships ground paternalistic permissions is simple, and leans heavily on Schapiro's own account, without committing to her embrace of the distinction in status between children and adults. On Schapiro's account, paternalism is essentially objectionable when it interferes with an agent's autonomy. In her terms,

Paternalism is *prima facie* wrong because it involves bypassing the will of another person. In Kantian terms, paternalism prevents another from casting her vote as a legislating member for a possible kingdom of ends (Schapiro, 1999, 730).

But to cast one's vote as a legislating member for a possible kingdom of ends is just to act autonomously, in Kant's view, rather than heteronomously. So I interpret Schapiro as holding that what makes paternalism wrong, when it is wrong, is that it interferes with autonomy.

If this is what makes paternalism wrong, then paternalism will be permissible when paternalistic treatment does *not* interfere with the autonomy of the subject of the paternalistic treatment. Schapiro's account secures this result with respect to children by denying that children are capable of acting autonomously. What makes them incapable of acting autonomously, on her view, is not the lack of some capacity or proficiency, but rather the fact that to act autonomously is to be self-determined, but children do not, in the required sense, yet possess a self. It is the last step of this explanation that commits Schapiro to a status-based account.

Yet, we need not assume that a child *cannot* choose autonomously in some domain in order to explain why paternalistic treatment of her does not interfere with her autonomy—we need only assume that the child *will not* choose autonomously. The empirical fact that a child's preferences *are not* autonomous is enough for disregarding those preferences not to prevent her from acting autonomously—it need not also be true that there is no choice *in principle* that would be autonomous for her.¹²

Compare again the case of my children, each of whom is perfectly capable, under a wide range of circumstances, of autonomously choosing which toy they prefer to play with. Yet, often the mere fact that their sibling is playing with some toy makes that very toy such an attractive object of choice, that in a house with thousands of toys, we often find ourselves in the middle of fights over who is to play with some given toy—but always a different one, on different occasions. When we find ourselves in the middle of such a fight, and my four-year-old son's strong preference to play with the very toy his sister is playing with is heteronomously determined, it is neither here nor there that he in fact is able to choose toys autonomously.

What matters in such cases is that jealousy is preventing my son from choosing autonomously on this occasion. When I treat him paternalistically by guiding him toward a different toy selection, I do nothing that is impermissible. And if that is right, then it should not matter whether a child ever lacks a voice, in Schapiro's sense that “there is no voice that counts as hers” (Schapiro, 1999, 729). What matters, is whether she is speaking with that voice on a given occasion, and whether she can be expected to.

So I agree with the first steps of Schapiro's explanation of permissible paternalism toward children—that objectionable paternalism is objectionable because of how it interferes with autonomy, and that autonomy involves a kind of self-authorship. I simply suggest that it is possible to cajole, bribe, coerce, or act in other paternalistic ways toward children when doing so *enables* them to be the authors of their own lives rather than interferes with it.

Parents are in an especially good position to act in ways that enable their children to be self-authors, because parental relationships are in general committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence. What I mean by this is that parents live lives that intersect with their children closely and repeatedly in ways that make them bound to have effects on their children's choices, identity, and character. This is the sense in which they are relationships of influence. They are forward-looking, because this relationship of influence is expected and understood to endure far into the future. And they are committed, because the prospect of an enduring relationship of influence is not just an expectation, but also a commitment on the part of the parent.

The parties to committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence expect and are committed to helping to shape one another over time. Since parents expect and are committed to helping to shape their children over time, they are in a position, and know that they are in a position, to help to constitute the self whose authorship makes their child's actions self-authored. This means that they are in a position to educatedly act in ways that they are in a position to anticipate comport with their child's true choice, even though their child may herself not yet, or at least not at the time, be in a position to see how that is so.

¹²Indeed, it arguably goes much too far to commit to the claim that *nothing* could interfere with a child's autonomy, simply in order to justify the claim that paradigmatically permissible-seeming forms of paternalism toward children *do not* so interfere.

6 | CASES AND CAVEATS

A couple of months ago, my seven-year-old daughter asked me to help her write a book. Despite already having too many serious book projects on my table, I immediately said “yes,” and we began discussing what the book would be about. Had I never raised the issue again, I would most likely never have heard from her again about it—we often discuss passing fancies. But instead I took her seriously, and we began to craft an outline for a novel about a child's conversations with her philosophy professor father. Because she is a busy child with many pulls on her time and attention, we made what progress we have so far because I've insisted—I've offered her the treat of staying up later past bedtime to work on it, treated it like a substitute for some of her schoolwork, and I've even pressured her to find time to make for it. I have, in short, applied many of the tools of coercion and influence that are typical of paternalistic interventions.

Now, I have no idea whether my daughter and I will ever manage to complete a book together—in part because I have no idea whether between the two of us we have enough patience and attention for the project and furthermore no idea whether anyone would ever want to read our book, if we do finish it. But I do know that whereas at first it was me putting pressure on her to put in some time to fulfill her plan, it is now she who pressures *me* to put in the time on it. What started out as a passing fancy—which for a few weeks she would most likely have rejected as such if not carefully cultivated—has blossomed into a deep-seated ambition that is truly her own. Parenthood is simply littered with examples like this one.

It may be helpful to draw an analogy between the account that I am offering and one of Bernard Williams' famous remarks about putative claims about external reasons. According to Williams, people sometimes intelligibly make claims about another person's reasons even when they know that there is no antecedent basis in the other person's motivational set for being moved by such a reason, but in the hope and expectation that *by* telling the other person that they have such a reason, they can make it true—by inducing the appropriate change in her motivational set. Such claims are in Williams' terms *proleptic* internal reasons statements, because they are not truly to be interpreted as properly external reasons statements, but instead as internal reasons statements that get a little bit ahead of themselves, but are nevertheless licensed because of how they can make themselves true.

Similarly, I suggest, parents, as parties to committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, are in a position to act in ways that proleptically support their children's autonomy, by helping to constitute and shape their children's selves, and hence by helping to constitute which actions comport with their child's self-authorship. The key difference is that no act of paternalism can be efficaciously identity-constituting in the way that a single internal reasons statement might have the prospect to make itself true. They can only be efficacious as small parts of a comprehensive mode of relating to a child which over time effect the parent's influence. That is why only people who expect and are committed to persisting in such relationships are in a position to act in ways that are proleptically autonomy-respecting.

Now there are cases, and there are cases. When Earl Woods introduced his son Tiger to golf before the age of two and engaged in coercive methods to keep him motivated at practice and training from a very young age, he was engaging in paternalistic treatment. Over the course of many years, there were days when Tiger would have preferred not to have gotten up to practice, or when he would have preferred to call it a day earlier, and yet still got up to practice or still kept at it because of his father's paternalistic methods. By any quantitative standard, Earl Woods' treatment of his child was reputedly extremely paternalistic—choosing for him which sport he would invest in, and choosing the investment in this sport over many other reasonable choices of pastimes, in addition to choosing for Tiger how to spend his time in developing as a golfer.

Yet, it is also possible that in doing so, Earl Woods succeeded at shaping Tiger into the *person* who he is, and not only into the *golfer* who he is. One way of assessing whether he did might be to look at whether Tiger himself feels pride over his early investment into golf. It doesn't make sense to take this kind of pride in actions that are not authentically your own—in behavior that is not truly autonomous. So by shaping the self who Tiger turned out to be, Earl Woods may possibly have succeeded—even in his extremely paternalistic treatment—in making it true that Tiger's choices could be attributed to that self. If this is right, I am suggesting, then he made it turn out to be true that those actions were autonomous after all, despite the appearances at the time to the contrary.

But I don't know that this interpretation is right. Whenever we override our children's wishes in confidence that we can play a role in shaping who they are, we are placing a kind of bet. If we win the bet, then we succeed in shaping our children in such a way as to make their choices stem from who they really are. But if we lose the bet, then we do not succeed, and our interference may in fact run *contrary* to our children's autonomous wishes. Even if Earl Woods did win his bet, there may also be another thousand golf dads out there who are following in his footsteps but failing. They may have overestimated their potential to shape their own children, or they may have just been unlucky.

Even if parents do not interfere with their children's autonomy when they succeed at shaping them so as to make these actions conform to their true wishes, they may still wrong their children by taking improper *risks* of violating their autonomy. And parental influence can be objectionable in other ways, as well, that have nothing to do with interfering with autonomy. Parents can instill distorted values into their children, and they can groom them to be happy with their place in a society ordered hierarchically by race, gender, and class. So there is still ample room for further objections to such behavior that is not grounded in the way that it interferes with autonomy.

7 | UPSHOTS

Okay. So far, so wild. I have been suggesting that coercion and manipulation can be autonomy-respecting in a child not because that child has no capacity to express or exert their own will in the matter, but simply because without the imposition of outside support, she will not. Parents are not only in an epistemically privileged position to understand when this may happen, they are also in an influentially privileged position to be able to know *and help to choose* which choice is the one that ultimately expresses their child's self-authorship. This last claim is the wildest—the most contentious, at least—part of my account. Still, I'll turn now to the upshots of the account, starting by filling out how this account makes good on the initial promise of relational accounts to remedy the defects of—or at least to evade the challenges facing—status-based accounts of the scope of permissible paternalism.

Consider first the differences and similarities in authority to engage in paternalistic treatment possessed by parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and strangers. As I noted already, all relational views possess the structure to differentiate between the claims of parents and strangers without the need to appeal to a second layer of standing or delegation. And in the case of my particular account, it is easy to see not only that parents typically do stand in committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence with their children, but that strangers do not. So the account makes good on the distinction between parents and strangers.

My account also makes sense of the independent, non-delegated, claims to authority to engage in paternalistic treatment of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and in some cases teachers, mentors, and coaches. Since permissible paternalism is grounded in committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, there will be similar grounds for permissible paternalism wherever there are committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, and many grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers,

mentors, and coaches are indeed engaged in committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence with their grandchildren, nieces and nephews, students, mentees, and athletes. Of course, not all are, but likewise neither all biological nor all legal or conventional parents are so engaged with their children. It is again a virtue of the account that it draws a distinction where it matters.

And whereas the parents of especially young children have wide swaths over which they can expect to exert influence over their children, and both much time and many opportunities on which to exert it, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, mentors, and coaches will have fewer domains over which they can expect to exert influence, and both less time and fewer occasions over which they can expect and be committed to exerting it. Consequently, the matters over which they will be licensed to engage in paternalistic treatment will be more restricted, and the scope over which they will be entitled to conflict with the apparent choices of the child will be more limited. And this again comports with our expectation not only that others can have non-delegated authority to engage in paternalistic behavior toward children, but only in more restricted ways than parents.

Finally, just as grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, mentors, and coaches have relationships that are some combination of less committed, less forward-looking, or of less influence than those of parents, and consequently come with lessened scope for paternalistic authority, likewise parents can be expected to diminish in the scope of their paternalistic authority as the expectation of future time and opportunity for influence, and the expectation of the effectiveness of such influence, gradually declines. On this view it is not that parents have less influence over their children over time because one or both parties recognize that the parent's authority has become more limited, but rather that the parent's scope of authority becomes more limited because their opportunity for influence has become diminished.

The relational account that I have defended can also explain why we can not only do without sharp distinctions between children and adults, but indeed without making any invidious distinctions between children and adults at all. Larisa Svirsky makes the point about theories of responsibility that

if we make being responsible a function of the psychological capacities of individual agents, we are forced to consider impaired and immature agents marginal. But we do not (or at least should not) treat them as marginal in our responsibility practices. For this reason, we ought to understand responsibility in relational terms. (Svirsky, 2020, 26)

Svirsky's point is that making responsibility depends on psychological capacities in order to excuse children for some kinds of behavior undermines the appropriateness of their parents holding them responsible for the same or other kinds of behavior. In this paper, we have been concerned not directly with responsibility but with the permissible scope for paternalistic treatment. But a similar point holds. Drawing a sweeping distinction between children and adults, as Schapiro would have us do, robs children of the standing to appropriately get credit, even for their achievements. By not drawing any sharp line between children and adults, the relational account that I have been defending allows us to give credit to children as authors of their achievements, even when those achievements do not fit neatly into Schapiro's conception of domains of discretion.

The flip side, of course, of drawing no firm moral line between the status of children and that of adults is that my account leaves open the possibility of a wide range of permissible paternalistic treatment between adults. This will alarm many readers. Yet, I contend that it should not. My account predicts only that paternalism between adults can be permissible in the context of committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence. So the kinds of relationships between adults that will license paternalistic treatment will only be those of long-lasting commitment—between very close friends,

spouses, siblings, or the like. And even within these relationships, appropriate paternalism will be limited to areas of expectable influence.

The paradigm, of course, of someone who engages in paternalistic treatment as part of a committed, forward-looking, relationship of influence, is that of a newly married spouse who gets to work on trying to change their partner in some respect. And we all know examples of such behavior that do not cast this paradigm in a flattering light. But my account does not license all attempts to change one's loved ones; it only makes room for the *possibility* of such permissible treatment, when the scope for influence is sufficiently great.

And an account like mine, on which there is at least some core set of good cases in which paternalistic attempts to influence one's partner are *not* out of order, can make much better sense of why loving adults might treat one another in this way even in cases in which such behavior *is* out of order, than accounts on which this is a completely inappropriate way of relating to an adult. For on my view, since paternalistic intervention is appropriate in at least *some* cases, it is intelligible either to make the honest mistake of thinking that one is in such a case even when one is not, or the slightly less honest mistake of being self-deceived about whether one is in such a case. In contrast, if paternalism is *never* the appropriate mode of relating to another competent adult, then it is hard to see how behaving in such ways could ever be the result either of an honest mistake or of mildly self-serving self-deception.

Another reason for alarm at the implication of my account that paternalism between adults is not always wrong is that it undermines an easy anti-paternalistic argument for a liberal conception of the state. According to this argument, paternalistic treatment is wrong in general, and so ipso facto it is wrong for the state. But even if paternalistic treatment is not wrong in general, but only wrong outside the context of committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, we can still recover this argument, so long as we are willing to defend the additional premise that the state is not, or should not be, in a committed, forward-looking, relationship of influence with each of its citizens.

I conclude that the consequences of my relational account of the scope for permissible paternalism should not be alarming, and in fact comport well with what we should hope for from a successful explanatory account.

8 | PERSONS, SELVES, AUTONOMY, AND NARRATIVE

I'll close with some brief, largely speculative, observations about the role of our theory of *persons* in accounts of the scope of permissible paternalism that, like Schapiro's and my own, are grounded in explanations of why some forms of paternalistic treatment do not genuinely interfere with autonomy. On the assumption that autonomous choice is choice that is self-determinative, whether any given choice is *genuinely* autonomous, as opposed to merely bearing the default earmarks of autonomy, will depend on the nature of the self. In Schapiro's terms, it will depend on whether that choice is properly *attributable* to the agent's self.

In his landmark discussion of what has come to be known as “attributability” in the literature, Harry Frankfurt (1971) contended that there is a genuine difference between actions that are properly determined by a person himself, and those that are merely caused by causal processes going on—even if those causal processes occur within the agent's own body. The former actions are “more truly his own” (Frankfurt, 1971, 13). It is such actions, I have claimed along with Schapiro, that autonomy-undermining paternalism interferes with or prevents. But Frankfurt also made a striking further claim that stands out the title of his paper. He claimed that the right way to understand which actions are more truly an agent's own, is to understand what or whom the agent himself or herself *is*. An account of attributability must flow, Frankfurt suggested, from an account of the nature of *persons*, for

attributable actions are actions that are attributable to persons. Assuming that this observation is right, it is well worth seeing where it leads.

In Frankfurt's own account, this observation plays out because he identifies the person with the will—so agents who have wills and act on them are persons, and agents who lack wills, or whose wills are never effective, are simply, in Frankfurt's terms, wantons. So the actions that are truly the agent's own are those that are caused in the right way by her will—because those are the ones that are caused by the person herself, and not merely by causal processes within her body. But if we substitute alternative accounts of the nature of persons for Frankfurt's, we get alternative conceptions of which actions or behaviors are truly the agent's own, and hence which are attributable to her.

Schapiro's account fits neatly into a long tradition of accounts of personal identities or the self on which persons are essentially self-constituted. It echoes Christine Korsgaard's (1996) account, which like Schapiro's, closely identifies Kantian principles for choice with a kind of *practical identity*, which determines what counts as the agent's own will. In a less Kantian vein, Marya Schechtman (1996) gives an important similarly self-constituting account which makes even clearer that in coming to adopt something like what Korsgaard calls a practical identity, one is coming to constitute one's *self* in the requisite way for there to be a fact of the matter about which actions are more truly one's own, and which are not. On all of these views, each person is in some sense authoritative on who she is as a person—and so they lend themselves to Schapiro's central idea that nothing can be truly one's own until one has had the opportunity to constitute oneself *as* a self—in her terms, to make something count as one's will.

But alternative accounts of persons lend themselves to strikingly different conclusions. According to the fascinating and illuminating account of Hilde Lindemann, for example, developed particularly in her (2001) and (2014), persons are not essentially self-constituted, but instead are *socially constructed*. What this means, in Lindemann's hands, is that other people in one's life—parents, siblings, teachers, friends—have a part to play, along with oneself, in constituting who one is as a person. So on Lindemann's view there *can* be a fact of the matter about who one is, or where one stands, and hence, I take it in Schapiro's terms, about what constitutes one's will—even as a very young child.

So if we plug Lindemann's social construction view of persons or personal identities into Schapiro's framework, we get a deep explanation of how parents, grandparents, teachers, and coaches might be entitled, as I have claimed, to treat children in paternalistic ways in virtue of their own power to help to constitute those children as persons, and hence to constitute which of the child's choices are truly self-directed. Because Lindemann's social construction theory of personal identities grants more power to friends and loved ones, it also grants more scope for paternalistic intervention, *without* denying that young children ever deserve credit for their choices.

Lindemann's account of persons therefore provides us with most of what I need for the relational account of the scope for permissible paternalism that I have defended in this paper. It is enough for most of my purposes. But in fact, I am inclined to go further than Lindemann. Lindemann and Schechtman have in common the idea that our personal identities are *narratively* constituted—constructed out of stories or interpretations of the events in our lives. The idea that narrative plays a role in the constitution of persons fits particularly well with Frankfurt's idea that our account of persons dictates which aspects of someone's behavior are authentically their own and which are not, because narrative understanding is shaped by the contrast between the protagonist and her predicament, and the question of whether some aspect of someone's behavior or psychology—her addictive desire, say—is authentically her own is essentially the question of whether we should see it as part of the protagonist, or part of her predicament.

But whereas Schechtman's and Lindemann's views both grant a large role for *narrative* in their accounts, of persons, they contrast over whose narratives play that role. Schechtman's view is that we

are in some sense the stories that we tell about our own lives, while Lindemann's view is that we are the stories that the people in our lives collectively tell about us. But both of these views contrast with the alternative but closely related view that we are the *best* interpretive story *to* be told about our lives. This is the account of the nature of persons that I have begun to defend in other work.¹³ I call it the *interpretive* account.¹⁴

The interpretive account of persons, like Lindemann's social construction account, gives a great deal of room for others to help to constitute who we are as persons, by exerting their influence over the course of our lives. But in contrast to Lindemann's account, it gives a special scope for facts about the future to help to constitute us as persons. This is because in contrast to both Schechtman's first-personal account and Lindemann's social construction account, the interpretive account does not need to select among narrative interpretations given to our lives at different times. It holds that the best interpretation of our lives is the interpretation that makes the best sense of our lives as a whole. But this creates a simple contrast between children and adults that does not turn on any difference in children's proficiencies or capacities. The fundamental difference between children and adults is that more of children's lives lies still in front of them.¹⁵

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¹³Schroeder (2019a, 2019b).

¹⁴The interpretivist account of persons is instructively compared to David Lewis's *radical interpretation* account of the contents of mental states and of language. Fittingly, Lewis says that the constraints on the problem of radical interpretation have their source as “the fundamental principles of our general theory of *persons*” (Lewis 1974, 334, my emphasis).

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