

Identity Threat

Michael Cholbi on the ways in which paternalism shows disrespect

Tina's younger sibling Ursula is planning to enroll in a university next year. Although Tina has great affection for her younger sister, she does not entirely trust her judgement, particularly when it comes to momentous life choices. Ursula, Tina observes, tends to take the road of least resistance when it comes to her education, preferring less demanding fields of study to those that will prove both more vocationally beneficial and more personally satisfying over the long term. Tina believes she should intervene in Ursula's decision making so that Ursula chooses a university that best suits her needs. She knows Ursula has narrowed her choices to two nearby institutions, Middling University and Cachet University. Tina strongly believes that Cachet is the more demanding institution and hopes to steer Ursula toward Cachet and away from Middling. But how to do this?

Plan (a): After deliberating between Middling and Cachet, Ursula prefers Middling but decides to apply to both. Tina volunteers to mail Ursula's application materials to both institutions, but ensures that the application to Middling is sufficiently delayed that the application is past deadline. Ursula is admitted to Cachet and enrolls there.

Plan (b): Ursula is deliberating between Middling and Cachet. Hoping to appeal to Ursula's love for weekend dance parties, Tina exaggerates how lively the nightlife is near Cachet's campus. Ursula applies to and is accepted at both institutions, but moved by Tina's descriptions of Cachet's social scene, enrolls there.

Plan (c): Ursula is aware of both Middling and Cachet. Whenever a mailer from Middling arrives at their home, Tina quickly discards it, and whenever Middling is mentioned, Tina assiduously attempts to distract Ursula. As a result of these efforts, Ursula hardly considers Middling, applies only to Cachet and enrolls there.



No matter which of these plans Tina adopts in order to steer Ursula toward Cachet, Ursula has at least some reason to resent Tina's paternalistic action toward her. Tina's actions reflect morally admirable intentions, and it may well be that Tina is correct that Ursula would be better off enrolling at Cachet rather than at Middling. But if she does so, her choice would be less fully her own than it would be otherwise. Having judged Ursula to be less competent than herself with respect to choosing an educational path, Tina tilts the balance between Ursula's powers of choice and action determining where she studies and Tina's powers of choice and action making that determination. Tina has, *in Seana Shiffrin's language*, 'substituted' her agency or judgement for Ursula's, at least with respect to Ursula's educational choices. Ursula may well concede that Tina is her 'educational superior', better equipped to make wise choices about where to study. But she is not likely to concede that Tina is her moral superior, entitled to guide Ursula's choices in matters that primarily concern Ursula. Tina's beneficence notwithstanding, Ursula has grounds for resenting Tina's paternalism. Tina has failed to show respect for Ursula as a rational agent with her own powers of rational choice and decision.


That paternalism involves substituting our rational powers for another's, even for the other's benefit, thus seems to provide a powerful moral reason to oppose it. Intuitively though, Tina's paternalistic plans to steer Ursula toward Cachet do not seem equally objectionable. In particular, Ursula seems to have more reason to resent Tina if she adopts plan (c) than if she adopts plan (b), and more reason to resent Tina if she adopts (b) than if she adopts (a).

I propose that the moral objectionability of these plans reflects the different ways in which others can attempt to influence how we choose. For each of Tina's plans engages with a different one of Ursula's powers of rational choice.

With Tina's plan (a), Ursula has chosen a preferred option (Middling). By delaying Ursula's application, Tina has made it harder to pursue that option. She has interfered with Ursula's instrumental rationality, or what we may call her power of satisfaction, namely, the rational power of following the best means to one's chosen options.

Plan (b) does not involve Tina trying to thwart Ursula pursuing her chosen option. Rather, Tina, by making misleading statements about the social scene at Cachet, is attempting to make Cachet appear more desirable than Middling from Ursula's perspective. Ursula must use her power of discrimination to choose among two options each of which she takes as genuine possibilities.

In plan (c), Tina attempts neither to make it harder for Ursula to use the means at her disposal to enroll at Middling, nor to make Middling appear less attractive to Ursula. Tina's acts are aimed at keeping Ursula from taking Middling seriously. She is attempting to displace Middling from the menu of options Ursula can deliberate about or choose among. Tina thus interferes with Ursula's power of recognition, her capacity to identify an option as worthy of consideration.

Why does Ursula have a stronger reason to resent Tina using paternalistic plan (b) than her using plan (a), and a still stronger reason to resent Tina using plan (c)? Because our rational powers have a structure that corresponds with our practical identity, our understanding of what we value and why. When a person interferes with our power of satisfaction, they interfere with our power to satisfy an option we are committed to. But the power of ascertaining the best means of bringing about our options is not very deeply entangled with our practical identities. Anyone who shares an option with us has reason to pursue that end efficiently and effectively. The rational power of satisfaction is thus relatively peripheral to our practical identities. It enables us to realize what we value but is not exercised in order to figure out which options to value. The rational power of discrimination sits more centrally at the core of our practical identities though. We exercise it so as to identify which options to pursue among those we recognize as worthy of consideration. To interfere with our power of discrimination is thus to interfere with a power more definitive of our practical identities. The rational power of recognition is even more central to our practical identities than is the power of discrimination. For the power of recognition establishes the menu of options from which we choose. Thus, what a person cares about—indeed, what a person even *can* care about—is established via her exercising her power of recognition. 

The rational powers thus vary in how fundamental they are to our understandings of ourselves and what we value: recognition is most central, discrimination less so, satisfaction even less so again. That these powers are structured in these ways is further evident from the fact that they have an embedded structure: A person can only satisfy an option she has chosen to pursue, which in turn means she had to discriminate among options that she recognizes as worthy of consideration, which in turn means she had to recognize some of those options as worthy of consideration. The power of recognition thus has the largest role of the three powers in setting the agenda for our rational choices, discrimination the second largest, and satisfaction the smallest.

That different paternalistic acts interfere with different rational powers is not of merely theoretical interest. It also helps gauge the overall justifiability of those acts. Assuming that the three paternalistic plans Tina considers are equally effective in steering Ursula toward Cachet, then Ursula presumably stands to benefit to the same degree regardless of which plan Tina pursues. But as we have observed, this does not mean that Ursula should be indifferent among (a), (b), or (c). For she has more reason to resent interference with rational powers that are more central to her practical identity. Tina should also not be indifferent among these three plans; all other things being equal, she should opt for (a) rather than (b) or (c).

This, of course, does not tell us whether any of Tina's three plans are morally justifiable. It may be that Ursula should accept all three plans because the benefits (enrolling in the university that better suits her needs) are great enough, or it may be that Ursula should oppose all three plans because their benefits simply do not merit Tina interfering with any of Ursula's three powers. But it does give us a subtler picture of what stands on one side of the relevant scale. In determining whether we should tolerate others' paternalism, we cannot simply measure how much better off we would be if their paternalism were effective in leading us to choose what is presumptively better for us. We must also take into account the degree to which our identities as practically rational agents are threatened by their paternalism. Grasping that those identities are grounded in rational powers with an embedded structure enables us to measure the magnitude of those threats.

Michael Cholbi is Professor of Philosophy at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. This essay is based on his article 'Paternalism and Our Rational Powers', published in Mind. His research interests also include Kantian ethics and issues in the philosophy of death and dying.

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