

## Individualism's Incompatibility with Paternalism

In this paper, I will argue against Goodin's "Permissible Paternalism" on the basis that his definition of preferences harms the individuality of the lives of those involved. Goodin justifies his paternalistic interference through the lens of liberal values, namely autonomy, by trying to support the "true" preferences of the agents involved in a given decision. The fault of his argument lies in the fact that there is this underlying assumption that the state has any knowledge over any arbitrary individual's true preferences is possible, and the implications lead to disastrous consequences for such an individual's autonomy. Below, I will outline Goodin's preferences for his permissible paternalism, demonstrate the faults of its assumptions in potential applications, and evaluate the impact of these faults on his overall ideas.

Goodin argues that there are four distinct preferences that the state must be convinced someone is acting on in order to not justify interference (200). In other words, if the state is convinced that an agent is not acting on one of these preferences, then there is a justification for interference. The first preference is relevant preferences, which refers to the factual information relevant to the decision at hand. Goodin exemplifies this preference as someone knowing the health issues related to smoking before deciding to smoke (201). This preference is reasonable as people should have all the relevant information regarding their decisions. The next preference is settled preferences, which refers to preferences made while someone is in a transitory phase. An example of this is the "dare-devil" attitude that teenagers have towards life, which is eventually grown out of (Goodin 202). This preference is tied to Goodin's idea that paternalism should act on big decisions whose consequences are

permanent in some way and seems reasonable to prevent future regret. Next, there are preferred preferences, which refers to multiple, conflicting preferences that an individual has regarding a decision. An instance of this is a smoker who wants to quit for health reasons, but also wants to continue smoking due to this addictive nature (Goodin 202). This preference seems to aim at separating the surface-level desires from deeper preferences that someone may have. The final preference is “authentic” preferences, which refers to choices that someone makes are truly their own. Take the example of smoking advertisements, which may use psychology and marketing tricks to make people believe it is part of a “glamorous” lifestyle (Goodin 203). If the goal of Goodin’s paternalism is to promote the autonomy of individuals, then this preference is an important criterion to consider. Overall, Goodin’s four preferences raise important, reasonable points that agents should consider when making decisions for themselves.

The key assumption of Goodin’s preferences is that the state has access to perfect knowledge of all four preferences for any arbitrary individual. In order to apply his ideas, either the state would have to have massive surveillance over its people in order to know these preferences or it would have to make assumptions about what the preferences of individuals are, both of which are disastrous for autonomy. In the first case, a surveillance state would fundamentally alter how people behave and interact as people behave differently when they know their actions are being monitored. Alternatively, the state could monitor its people without telling them, but this is perhaps even worse as the state is not respecting its people enough to be transparent. In any case, it is evident that a surveillance state puts a constant influence over every decision that an individual makes, thereby reducing their

autonomy. It is important to acknowledge that the reduction in autonomy in these cases will influence the individuality that those under surveillance are able to express, thus individualism is suppressed in these situations.

Alternatively, the state may attempt to implement these ideas without using surveillance, but then they would make some assumptions about individual preferences. The best proxy that a state may use to assume the preferences of individuals are social norms. For example, take the case of a young woman who wants to be sterilized. The state may interfere on the basis of Goodin's settled preferences. The state may refuse to sterilize her, despite her expressing this is her own preference, due to the fact that there is the underlying social norm that says women should bear children. Another example is the case of someone who wishes to drop out of high school for various personal reasons. The state may justify their interference by Goodin's authentic or settled preferences. In any case, the state may not respect the experience that this individual has undergone because there is this underlying social norm that education is a necessity to succeed. The point is that reinforcing social norms does not promote the autonomy of individuals, but instead only promotes social expectations of individuals. In other words, it only promotes certain kinds of lives over others, which harms the autonomy of individuals who do not want those lives. When autonomy is reduced in this manner, it reduces the individuality that people are allowed to express because then the state and society dictate what lives are "acceptable."

Altogether, the above objection shows the assumptions that Goodin's preferences imply that the state may need to play a much larger role than intended, and its consequences ultimately limit the autonomy that Goodin is trying to promote. In order to rectify this,

Goodin needs to rethink the grounds that the state can act on with the limitations of the state's knowledge in mind. Additionally, this would require rethinking the necessity of some of his defined preferences, particularly settled preferences. Overall, Goodin's preferences currently have very good use when it comes to individual decision-making and reflecting on one's own decisions since they can have absolute knowledge over themselves, but these are not applicable to the state.

## Works Cited

Goodin, Robert E. "Permissible Paternalism: Saving Smokers from Themselves." *Disputed Moral Issues*, edited by Mark Timmons, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 198–204.