

BEYOND INADVERTENT VENTRILOQUISM: CARING VIRTUES FOR ANTIPATERNALIST DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

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* Final Version appeared in *Hypatia*

Abstract: I argue that the epistemological virtues of concrete thinking, self-transparency, and narrative understanding developed by care ethicists can help development practitioners combat their own temptations to engage in “unconscious unjustified paternalism” (UUP). I develop the concept of UUP—a type of paternalism in which one party unjustifiably substitutes her judgment for another’s because of difficulty distinguishing her desires for the other from the other’s good. I show that the temptation to UUP is endemic to development and that care ethics contains virtues for combating it. Key to my claim is a view of caregiving as a practice of negotiating conflict.

“We decided to concentrate on Session 1 to elicit personal testimony, encourage women to talk freely, and to humanize the HIV/AIDS issue through personal identification..... Seated facing each other, they gradually started to tell their own stories about HIV/AIDs, overcoming their fear of strangers, and their anxieties about such a personal issue....All in the hut seemed to realize the gravity of the situation and that education was the key. After several hours of talk, several women exploded in indignation. It was no longer someone else’s issue. The Lombaba women realized that it was their issue. ...”When we go from here,” said a participant, “we have to share this education with our extended family, with our chief, and with the men’s groups. We’re dying and our men don’t care!” The women left the hut after three hours of non-stop discussion. By speaking out before their peers in the non-threatening study circle atmosphere, they were building within themselves the capacity for participation, for having a public voice.” The women ultimately identified three causes of the HIV/AIDs problem in their community: male-held myths about multiple lovers and the use of condoms, the prevalence of polygamy, and the lack of a government commitment to a serious educational program. (Fiedrich 2004, 33).

Above is a relatively typical account of a real-life participatory development exercise. A Western development practitioner—let’s call her “Sarah” in this paper—describes helping a group of Lombaba women become empowered to identify their own needs.¹ The story appears in one of anthropologist Marc Fiedrich’s critical works on participatory development. Fiedrich expresses skepticism about whether the exercise really went as Sarah claims. Were the women truly identifying their own needs? Could such deep transformation happen in three hours (Fiedrich,2004 34)? How did the women arrive at such seamless agreement if the exercise began from personal testimonies that must have been diverse (Fiedrich 2004, 34)? Further, and perhaps most provocatively, was Sarah just hearing what she wanted to hear? The Lombaba women’s “own” assessment of the causes of their community’s problems, Fiedrich notes, is suspiciously similar to the assessment of Africa’s problems that has been prevalent among missionaries for over a century (Fiedrich 2004, 35).

¹ The actual development practitioner in the epigraph is Leonard Oliver. I have chosen to change Oliver’s name here, because I am more interested in using this example to illustrate my thesis in this paper than in specifically criticizing Oliver. Further, it is unclear whether Oliver is really guilty of the ‘inadvertent ventriloquism’ Fiedrich accuses him of; neither Fiedrich’s account (2004) nor Oliver’s (1996) provide sufficient evidence from which to draw a conclusion about this.

Whether or not Fiedrich's indictment of Sarah is warranted (I will assume that it is, but only to illustrate my point), stories like Sarah's and criticisms like Fiedrich's abound in the literature on participatory development. This suggests that "inadvertent ventriloquism" is a persistent problem with attempts to empower people to identify and respond to their needs.² I want to raise ethical questions about what goes wrong in cases like Sarah's—cases where a development practitioner unconsciously substitutes her judgment for that of members of the community she is intended to serve. The wrong that concerns Fiedrich is double; the practitioner engaged in it does not only *substitute* her judgment for that of others but also *cannot distinguish* her judgment from theirs. What, precisely, is morally troubling about the type of error Fiedrich accuses Sarah of? What epistemic and ethical commitments contributed to it? And how might participatory development practitioners avoid this type of error?

I argue here that the temptation to what I call "unjustifiable unconscious paternalism" is endemic to development practice and that certain epistemic virtues identified by feminist care ethicists can help development practitioners combat this temptation. The essay is divided into three parts. I begin by identifying the species of paternalism I call "unjustifiable unconscious paternalism" and demonstrating that the temptation to it is endemic to development practice. I then argue that a certain strand within care ethics furnishes anti-paternalist epistemic virtues because of important similarities between caregiving and participatory development. Care ethics offers epistemic virtues for development, because both caregiving and development are collaborative projects aimed at identifying and pursuing another's good in which the "helping" party is situated so as to have difficulty perceiving challenges to her authority to define the other's good. I claim that care ethicists Carol Gilligan, Eva Feder Kittay, and Sara Ruddick have theorized epistemic virtues that enable helpers to better perceive conflicts between their views of the other's good and the what is actually in the other's best interests. Finally, I show how the virtues of loving attention, self-transparency, and narrative understanding might help participatory development practitioners work against their own paternalistic inclinations.

The Temptation to Unjustifiable Unconscious Paternalism as Endemic to Development Practice

Defining Unjustifiable Unconscious Paternalism

Most philosophical work on paternalism focuses on determining when it is justified. Important as these questions are, I ask here what causes a species of *unjustified* paternalism in development practice—the type that goes by the name "inadvertent ventriloquism" in development studies but that I will call "unjustifiable unconscious paternalism" (UUP). To begin to define it, we first note that UUP is a type of paternalism. Like all paternalism, it couples an act and a motivation. The act involves the paternalist substituting her judgment for the judgment of the other in a situation in which we would normally want the other's judgment to prevail. The motivation is to promote the other's good. But the unconscious paternalism I am concerned with differs

² Founder of participatory development, Robert Chambers, coined the term "inadvertent ventriloquism" to describe the tendency of people in positions of power to hear what they want to hear (1994). For more critical literature on participatory development, see in particular, see Cooke and Kothari (2001).

from other types of paternalism in two basic ways. First, in UUP, the paternalist is not morally justified in substituting her judgment for the other's. Second, UUP is not wholly conscious on the part of the paternalist; she believes, at least to some extent, that she is advancing the other's interests when she is in fact acting out her own desires.

We can see Sarah in our Swaziland example as engaged in UUP—as unconsciously substituting her concept of what the Lombaba women need for theirs. Participatory development would assume that identifying their own needs is within the “sphere of legitimate agency”³ of the Lombaba women. Sarah thinks her views *are* the Lombaba women's views. We are not sure why Sarah substitutes her judgment for theirs, but a number of reasons suggest themselves; she (erroneously) believes the Lombaba women are incapable of making their own decisions, she wants to confirm her existing beliefs about what women all over the world need, she needs to feel needed, etc. Yet it is plausible that Sarah is not fully aware of any of these motivations.

Two problems with the concept of UUP emerge when we examine Sarah's case. First, it may seem as though we need a definition of *justified* paternalism in order for the conception of UUP to be useful. In order to know whether Sarah's (or anyone else's paternalism) is unjustified, we need to know which reasons for paternalism are unacceptable. I admit that we would need to offer a robust account of justified paternalism in order to offer a complete account of UUP. However, my aim in this essay is limited to pointing out instances of UUP and suggesting strategies for avoiding its recurrence in participatory development. The reasons for which UUP is likely to occur in development are reasons most theorists of paternalism would fail to see as justifying paternalism. That is, and I will discuss this more fully in a moment, UUP in development is likely to occur because of practitioner discomfort with cultural difference, epistemic prejudice toward marginalized people, or the desire to feel that one is doing good. Whatever the grounds for acceptable paternalism are, most theorists of paternalism would agree that the above are not them.

Second, it may seem that UUP is not paternalism at all. I have just said that UUP is typically motivated by some variant of disdain toward the other or the desire to help oneself. But, one might object, paternalistic acts are, by definition, motivated by the desire to help the other. If Sarah is motivated by anything other than the desire to help the Lombaba women, this objection would suggest, she is not a paternalist. I reply by pointing out that this objection draws on a simplistic account of moral motivation. I take as a point of departure that it is possible for people to believe that they are acting out of desire to help others and simultaneously be motivated by self-regarding desires. Most motivations likely to lead to UUP in development involve misperception of the other's interests, desires, or capacities motivated by the practitioner's own investment in maintaining a certain view of herself and the world. Once we recognize that a development practitioner's investment in maintaining a particular self-concept and worldview can cause her to misunderstand the needs, desires, and capacities of others, UUP becomes plausibly describable as paternalism. The person engaged in UUP believes that she is helping the other, but her understanding of what helping the other would take is clouded by her own investments.

³ I take this term from Shiffrin (2000).

Temptations to UUP

Temptations to Paternalism in General

Given what I have said about why development practitioners might perpetrate UUP, we might wonder why we should investigate UUP as a particular vice—rather than as one variation on self-deception. UUP certainly does involve self-deception. But it is a type of self-deception that is likely to prevail under specific epistemic conditions. These are the epistemic conditions created by attempting to determine the other's good from within an unequal relationship. Once we see this, we will be able to see why UUP is likely to occur within development practice, and why prescribing epistemic virtues to development practitioners is one way to attempt to offset it. The types of epistemic virtues I am interested in here are virtues that facilitate accurate perception of the other's needs and desires.

To see that the temptation to UUP is high under certain epistemic and relational conditions, we need to understand something about the hermeneutic structure of paternalism. It is this: paternalism is made possible by a shared epistemic project and the possibility of different interpretations of how to undertake that project. The paternalist and the other share the project of determining how to achieve the other's good.⁴ Paternalism is only possible because the two parties can have different interpretations of how to achieve that project; I can only substitute my judgment for the other's if her judgment and mine might not be identical.

But this only tells us something about what makes paternalism a potential course of action. It does not tell us what makes the paternalist choose her judgment over the other's. We typically presume that a person herself is best situated to determine what is good for her. So the paternalist needs not only the possibility of conflicting interpretation; she needs a relatively strong reason to prefer her interpretation over the other's.

Now we can ask what is likely to furnish the paternalist with reason to prefer her judgment over the other's. The typical answer is this: the paternalist thinks she knows something the other does not know. The paternalist is committed to the belief—not just that she and the other can disagree—but that she is better positioned than the other to make the judgment in question. The paternalist does not simply make an evaluation of what the right thing to do is; she makes a negative evaluation of the other's capacity to know what the right thing to do is. Once we recognize this, we can understand something about the conditions under which paternalism is likely. Paternalism is *possible* because of the potential for conflict between the "helper's" view of the other's good and the other's actual good. It is *likely* under conditions where the parties seem to the paternalist to be in an unequal epistemic situation.

Temptations to UUP in Development

Now we need to distinguish the causes of the temptation to paternalism in general and the temptation to UUP. Paternalism may sometimes be justified under conditions where the other is less well-situated than the paternalist to make certain judgments. But, since our concern is with UUP, our question is, what would make an agent inclined to *unjustifiably* and *unconsciously* assume that she was better situated

⁴ In describing paternalism as underlain by the shared project of ascertaining the other's good, I am excluding cases in which the paternalized party does not desire her good.

than the other to make judgments about the other's good? That is, what might make the would-be paternalist act out of allegiance to a nonexistent epistemic inequality?

I have suggested that perception of epistemic inequality in a relationship makes paternalism likely. I want to suggest now that particular *types* of inequality make *UUP* likely. The UU paternalist overvalues her capacity to know or undervalues the other's. This may be caused by subjective features of the paternalist that would obtain independently of the unequal relationship; the paternalist may simply be an arrogant person who thinks she knows more than everybody else. But there are "patterned" relationships in development that will tempt even non-generally arrogant people to UUP. These are relationships in which the would-be paternalist is situated so as not to experience challenges to her epistemic authority that might reveal conflicts between the other's perception of her good and the paternalist's perception. There may be a literal sense in which the would-be paternalist is not situated to confront challenges to her epistemic authority; the situation may be that the objects of paternalism would suffer some sort of punishment for challenging the paternalist. But the paternalist's inability to experience challenges need not be caused by such literal impediments to the agency of the paternalized; the paternalist may be beholden to habits of perception or a conceptual framework that make it difficult for her to experience challenges to her epistemic authority for what they are.

We can imagine a practitioner undertaking a task like Sarah's in this type of relationship with the Lombaba women. We do not know much about Sarah's case, but there are certainly conditions under which the intended "beneficiaries" of participatory development can expect literal punishments for not appearing to agree with practitioner assessments; for instance, beneficiaries may have reason to fear that if they oppose the practitioner's will, they will lose access to development funds. We can also imagine practitioners being situated so that they will not perceive challenges to their epistemic authority for what they are. For instance, imagine that Sarah was invested in believing that African women were chafing at the bit to be free of polygamy. Imagine also that most of the Lombaba women do not believe that eradicating polygamy is the best way to stop HIV in their community and that they are correct in this belief. We can easily further imagine a practitioner like Sarah taking the voices of the few Lombaba women who happen to agree with her as indicative of the desires of the entire group.

So, relationships where a person is poorly situated to perceive challenges to her epistemic authority breed UUP. These types of relationships are endemic to development practice. Development practitioners are often chosen precisely because they are supposed to possess knowledge or capacities the beneficiaries do not possess. Sometimes they are technical experts, brought in to teach about the spread of disease or new agricultural methods. But even when they are not technical experts, they possess a training and knowledge base that most beneficiaries do not—training and knowledge associated with implementing development projects. It is also worth noting that this epistemic difference is usually accompanied by other sorts of practitioner privilege. Some development practitioners are Westerners working in Southern contexts, and this affects their ability to accurately perceive the needs of people in the South. Chandra Mohanty (1991) claims that that Western feminists conceive of Third World women as undifferentiated from one another in their poverty and powerlessness and thus differentiated only from Western women who represent the ideal of "modern" womanhood. But even when practitioners are not Western, they are often members of

privileged classes who had greater access to formal education than beneficiaries or high-status community members who have been chosen to influence their communities precisely because of their high status. Meanwhile, beneficiaries are typically chosen because they are particularly marginalized.

These inequalities make it difficult for practitioners to appropriately perceive contestations of their authority. Practitioners who bear some sort of expertise may rightly question certain criticisms as uninformed, but they may also easily overestimate the range of their expertise or perceive as uninformed criticisms that are fully reasonable. Practitioners who are privileged vis-à-vis beneficiaries may also bear a host of prejudices toward people from communities they are intended to serve. If practitioners are members of privileged classes, they likely have developed a lifetime of perceptual habits that devalue marginalized people's capacities as knowers.⁵ This potential for bias against marginalized people as knowers is likely to cut against the practitioner taking their challenges to her worldview seriously. Further, practitioners who are members of privileged cultures are likely to overvalue culturally familiar practices simply because they are familiar. This overvaluation of the familiar can encourage practitioners to dismiss beneficiary interest in promoting a culturally particular way of life as simple adaptive preference—that is to mistake beneficiary articulations of the desire for difference for articulations of the desire to perpetuate their own deprivation.⁶ Finally, development practitioners from both privileged classes and cultures may find themselves attracted to the idea of themselves as “saviors” of the poor.

It may seem that the solution to practitioner weakness at perceiving challenges to her authority is to eliminate inequalities from development relationships. There are certainly a host of moral and pragmatic reasons to prefer practitioners who are similarly situated to the communities they serve.⁷ However, the very idea of participatory development intervention supposes that marginalized people would benefit from being helped to see their problems in a new way and that this new way of seeing should be catalyzed by an outsider. Regardless of how similar to the community the practitioner is, she becomes some sort of outsider by virtue of being the one charged with helping community members see differently.

The upshot of this, I think, is that we must view the temptation to UUP as endemic to development practice—that is, as an ever-present threat that we cannot expect to eliminate simply by picking the right practitioners. However far picking the right practitioners may go in reducing UUP, practitioners need also to be trained to be vigilant about combating the temptation to UUP. This is why prescribing virtues to participatory development practitioners is key to creating a more ethical development practice.

Ethics of Care As an Anti-Paternalist Resource

Certain types of unequal relationships increase the potential for UUP. I want to claim now that certain feminist ethicists of care—Gilligan, Kittay, and Ruddick specifically-- identify epistemic virtues helpful for navigating these types of

⁵For discussion of epistemic prejudice against people from marginalized groups, see Alcoff and Fricker.

⁶ For more on the tendency of development practitioners to confuse difference with deprivation, see Khader (2011).

⁷ For a discussion of whether practitioners should be insiders, see Crocker (1991).

relationships.⁸ To note that UUP is likely to flourish because of certain types of relationships is already to suggest a reason to look to care ethics for ethical resources to combat it; the virtues feminist ethicists of care identify are virtues that arise out of practices in which one party aims to promote another's good and are characterized by unequal relationship—namely the practices of caring for others. Caregivers, like development practitioners, are often situated in relationships in ways that make it difficult for them to appropriately perceive challenges to their authority. Like development practitioners, caregivers may become invested in their worldviews and identities as helpers in a way that motivates them to misunderstand the interests and desires of those they care for. Further, like development practitioners, caregivers may fail to perceive challenges to their epistemic authority because of misassessments of the capacities (epistemic and otherwise) of those they care for, specialized knowledge, rigid conceptions of normality, and perceptual habits that encourage them to prefer their own worldviews to those of the cared for.

In drawing this analogy, I do not intend to imply that participatory development is a caring practice. Even if caregivers and development practitioners are both likely to have difficulty perceiving challenges to their authority, they certainly face different variations of those challenges to their authority. For instance, the psychological need to shape the other in mothering may be motivated partly by marginalization of the caregiver; as in cases where a mother unconsciously imposes her desires on her children because childrearing is one of the few domains of life in which she can exert control. Conversely, development practitioners may hold epistemic prejudices against people who are ethnically or economically marginalized that we do not expect caregivers to hold against their charges.

The analogy between caregiving and development may seem problematic for another reason—namely that it seems to compare the “beneficiaries” of development to children. This is not my intention. My point of departure in mining care for virtues for development is not that the Southern poor need to be cared for by development practitioners, but rather that both caregiving and development are practices aimed at achieving another's good in which the temptation to substitute one's view of the other's good for her actual good is high. Further, I claim that ethics of care furnish certain *epistemic* virtues that are useful for preventing UUP in these types of relationships. These are virtues that would be useful in the epistemic project of accurately perceiving the other's needs. I clarify that I am prescribing epistemic virtues to acknowledge that the ethical demands of the practices are often dissimilar. The development practitioner almost never has a warrant to substitute her view of beneficiaries' goods for their own; the caregiver often does.

In what follows, I argue that certain care ethicists identify epistemic virtues that enable “helpers,” those situated in relationships characterized by inequality and the shared project of identifying the other's good⁹, to perceive conflicts between their

⁸ Not all care ethicists agree that care ethics theorizes virtues; Held (2006) argues against conceiving care as a virtue theory.

⁹ It may seem that justice ethics are better suited than ethics of care to negotiate relationships in which conflicts about how to achieve the other's good arise. Though justice ethics are useful in placing limits on how disputes about the other's good should be resolved, I believe that some virtues associated with justice militate against perceiving conflicts between the “helper's” perception of the other's good and the other's own perception. For a discussion of how the attempt to see universality in the other can preclude

conceptions of the other's good and the other's good. Finding these virtues within care ethics requires attending to a somewhat under-theorized strand in care ethics—the dimension that paints caring practices as rife with struggle, conflict, and danger. The moral dangers that accompany caring practices come about as a result of the incapacity to perceive conflicts between the other's actual needs and one's perception of them—such as the danger of harming another who is utterly dependent because one does not know how to respond to a being like her, the danger of projecting one's desires onto her, and the danger of failing to see her for the particular being that she is.

Care ethicists theorize epistemic virtues that work against UUP. These are virtues that encourage caregivers to accurately perceive challenges to their conceptions of the their charges' goods. To understand why caregivers would need to develop these virtues, we need to understand caring relationships as containing temptations for caregivers to substitute their conceptions of their charges' needs for accurate conceptions of their charges' needs. We need to understand care ethicists as offering a view of relationships as sites of potential conflict-- between the view of the charge as a human being and the demands she makes as a particular individual, between the caregiver's needs and desires and her charge's, and between the demands of the charge's current needs and future growth.

Care ethicists describe caregivers as negotiating two potentially conflictual views of the charge—the view of the charge as human and the view of her as a particular individual. The caregiver risks imposing on the charge views of what the charge should be like that comes from general ideas about human beings—ideas that precede the relationship. Ruddick claims that mothers are inundated with injunctions and ideals about what normal children do. But to know what normal children do is not enough to know how to respond to them; as Ruddick aptly puts it, “no amount of generalizing is enough to meet particular needs on a particular day” (Ruddick, 86). But good caregiving is not simply a matter of *applying* general principles about how to treat human beings. It is not only about trying to determine whether the charge's behavior is normal; it is also about being open to revising and reinterpreting one's conception of normality. Ruddick recounts the story of Toni Cade Bambara's mother who could have asked her childhood self not to daydream on the floor but instead mopped around her; the implication is that Bambara's mother helped Bambara flourish as the individual that she was by refusing to enforce a rigid, preconstituted idea of normality (Ruddick, 86-7). Similarly, Kittay describes working to change what the world sees as normal in order to make it more hospitable to the flourishing of her disabled child (Kittay 1999, 166).

I think we should see caregivers like Bambara's mother and Kittay as resisting the temptation to substitute pre-established conceptions of their charges' needs for accurate representations of their needs. They revise their conceptions of universality in the face of their charges' demands. Some describe caregiving as a task that refuses to see the other in her universality. But a closer look at caring practices reveals no straightforward repudiation of universality. Rather, I submit that the good caregiver recognizes that the view of the charge as an instantiation of a universal furnishes some guidance about how not to harm the charge, but simultaneously recognizes that the universal view may contain flaws or may be inappropriately applied. She negotiates between the view of the

identification of her needs, see Benhabib (1992). For a discussion of how presumptions of equality can function to obscure actual inequalities in development, see Robinson (1999).

other as universal and particular, and she realizes that the demands of universality and the demands of caring for this particular other may sometimes seem to conflict. Robin Dillon articulates this process of oscillation in her concept of care-respect. For Dillon, one who engages in care-respect maintains a “constructive tension between regarding each person as *just as valuable* as every other person and regarding this individual as *special*” (Dillon 1992, 75).

Caregivers must negotiate a second type of conflict to be able to perceive challenges to their authority to define the other’s good-- conflict between their needs and desires and the charge’s. Ruddick repeatedly paints mothering as a *struggle*-- a struggle within the caregiver against arbitrarily submitting the charge to the caregiver’s desires. She recounts stories of mothers who want to keep their children dependent in order to maintain their self-conceptions as mothers (Ruddick 1995, 73) and even mothers who have moments of frustration in which they want to kill their infants (Ruddick 1995, 67). Ruddick is not alone in this characterization. Gilligan describes the conflict between “compassion and autonomy” as central to the struggle of her subjects making the abortion decision (Gilligan 1993, 71). Gilligan further claims that caring does not always require resolving this conflict on the side of self-sacrifice.

Both Ruddick and Gilligan seem to think that the caregiver’s negotiation of conflict between her desires and the charge’s needs can improve her caring capacities. Gilligan discusses how care reasoners who lose the capacity to distinguish self and other have their capacities as caregivers compromised. In a similar vein, Ruddick suggests that inner conflicts between the desire to help the charge and the desire for self-preservation are a fund of incentives to reflect on how to be a better caregiver; as she puts it, “thought-provoking ambivalence is a hallmark of mothering” (Ruddick 1995, 68).

Though my description of care ethics as theorizing conflict between the caregiver’s needs and the charge’s needs may seem contrary to the traditional description of care ethics as emphasizing connection between the caregiver and the charge, it need not be. Connection is not fusion, and maintaining connection is itself a labor—a labor that involves self-preservation and examination. To say this is not to capitulate to the ontology of justice that holds that the primary mode of interpersonal relationship is conflict. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that both conflict and coincidence between the desires of the caregiver and the needs of the charge are possible. Genuine relationship is not about the incorporation of the other into the self, but rather about seeing the project of the other’s flourishing as nonidentical with, albeit intertwined with, one’s own.

A third type of conflict that may obscure the other’s needs for the caregiver is between the caregiver’s desire to meet the charge’s current needs and foster her future growth. The temptation to substitute one’s conception of the other’s needs for her actual needs can arise from failure to recognize the shifting conditions of the charges’ dependency on the caregiver. In caring for children, the caregiver may mistakenly meet the charge’s current needs *for* her in a way that impedes the charge’s future capacity to meet her own needs.¹⁰ Ruddick sees mothers as fostering “increasingly separate existences” (Ruddick 1995, 72). Ruddick describes how a focus on meeting the charge’s

¹⁰ Though the paradigm case of care is childcare, care for those with degenerative conditions can also be impeded by an excessive focus on the present; the caregiver may fail to prepare for changes in her charge’s capacities that come about as the result of degeneration.

current needs may in some cases prevent the charge from developing a separate identity and the competencies required for individuality. The caregiver whose temporal perspective is too limited, who is unable or unwilling to envision greater future independence for the charge, will often fail to appropriately assess what the charge's good requires.

Caring Virtues for Antipaternalist Development Practice

I have argued that caregivers and development practitioners are both susceptible to UUP because both participate in practices characterized by the possibility of conflict about the good and by asymmetrical relationships where they are likely to inadequately perceive challenges to their authority. To gain an accurate sense of beneficiary needs, development practitioners must negotiate versions of the same conflicts caregivers negotiate. Further, like caregivers, practitioners are situated vis-à-vis beneficiaries in ways that make practitioners likely to exaggerate their own epistemic authority. I now specify the versions of those conflicts development practitioners face and show how virtues developed by care ethicists may help practitioners more fully perceive challenges to their authority.

Concrete Thinking and Loving Attention Against the Imposition of Ideals

Caregivers and development practitioners sometimes confuse their assessments of the other's needs with the other's actual needs because of focus on similarity or universality. Caregivers and practitioners may only see how those they are trying to help are like them or like some abstract conception of humanity. In development, the tendency toward this failure might be called the temptation to "impose ideals" on beneficiaries. Many feminist criticisms of development criticize development practitioners for imposing Western ideals on people in the South or of taking one-size-fits-all approaches to development. To return to our Swaziland example, Friedrich accuses Sarah of both imposing Western ideals (why the missionary preoccupation with polygamy?) and of taking a one-size-fits-all-approach (why is the chosen strategy for the Lombaba women identical to the preferred strategy everywhere in Africa?).

One virtue from care ethics, "concrete thinking," offers an innovative way of fighting this temptation—one free of certain deficiencies that characterize current theories about how to avoid imposing ideals in development. Some development theorists suggest that the way for the practitioner to avoid imposing ideals is to attempt to import nothing into the encounter, to attempt to stand back and valorize "the local." Mohan writes that a danger of participatory development is that, "by valorizing the local and being critical of our colonizing knowledge, 'we' behave as though we have nothing to offer" (Mohan, 163). But I think encouraging practitioners to view themselves as noncontributors to the participatory development encounter is a problematic solution for two reasons. First, practitioner noncontribution is an unfeasible ideal likely to lead to *more* UUP. The mere fact of the practitioner's presence structures beneficiary conversations; the practitioner who thinks she is contributing nothing imagines this fact away. This, in turn, is likely to cause the practitioner to fail to read between the lines about how her presence affects beneficiaries' expression of their needs. Think of Sarah who seems not to know that her positionality encourages the Lombaba women to frame their desires in ways that do not challenge the "party line" on how to combat HIV in Africa. Second, practitioner noncontribution may cause participatory development to

fall short of a key goal—inspiring of critical consciousness in beneficiaries. Participatory development is intended to help beneficiaries evaluate their existing desires, not simply recapitulate them, and this may require practitioners to import critical perspectives into the encounter.

Ruddick’s virtue of concrete thinking, when applied to development, suggests that practitioners should try to reinterpret their pre-established conceptions of what beneficiaries need based on information arrived at within the development encounter. Ruddick’s concrete thinking” cultivates what she calls “maternal authority.” Ruddick contrasts maternal authority to *paternal* authority in a way not unrelated to our present discussion of paternalism (Ruddick 1995, 42). According to Ruddick, the authority traditionally granted to fathers is legitimated by forces outside of the relationship between the father and child, rather than particular knowledge the father has of the child. Paternal authority is similar to the assumed authority that may make the development practitioner a paternalist; she may impose ideals on beneficiaries because of abstract knowledge that is legitimated in the world outside of the encounter with them.

Concrete thinking, which fosters maternal knowledge from within the relationship, allows the caregiver to negotiate between the view of the other as universal and the view of the other as particular. Ruddick juxtaposes concrete thinking to abstract thinking that decides *a priori* what type of information is relevant to determining the other’s good. Abstract thinking knows before any particular encounter with the other on what terms it expects her to communicate and what it will be forced to render unintelligible. Concrete thinking, in contrast, is thinking that can respond to what is strange, challenging, and unpredictable by revising the framework with which it began. Rather than merely looking for responses to problems, concrete thinking is open to reformulating problems; it recognizes that the set of abstractions with which we approach any actual situation may not be the right one (Ruddick 1995, 93).

Another caring virtue, loving attention, facilitates concrete thinking. Attentive love is the active search for otherness and particularity, an insistent willingness to have one’s habits of relating to the other disrupted. For Ruddick, this virtue combines the cognitive capacity of attention and the ethical response of love. Attentive love begins from the assumption that knowing the other involves encountering her rather than contemplating her needs in isolation. It “lets difference emerge without searching for comforting commonalities, dwells upon the *other* and lets otherness be” (Ruddick 1995, 122). Dwelling upon the otherness of the other allows one to begin to develop a knowledge about the other that arises, not from pre-established ideas of what that other should be like, but rather from immersion in what that other is actually like.

Concrete thinking suggests a new, antipaternalist way of envisioning negotiation between the universal and particular involved in understanding what constitutes another’s good. It asks us to question whether knowledge of what constitutes the other’s good can ever be sufficiently arrived at outside of the encounter. It formulates the project of finding out about another’s good as requiring concentrated attention to the other’s desires and persistent willingness to reinterpret the universal. Ruddick suggests, and this is critical for development practitioners, that the other may have something to teach about new ways of inhabiting the universal. Beneficiaries’ specific needs may be variations on universal needs. Yet practitioners may overlook this if their conception of the universal is too rigid. We might think of Sarah as having failed by espousing too

rigid a concept of the universal. She was equipped to hear the Lombaba women's narratives only to the extent that they confirmed her existing views about what all women needed. What if Sarah had conceived development as a collaboration that required the practitioner to be willing to let the other's difference challenge her interpretation of the universal? If Sarah had habits of listening that allowed her to reinterpret her understanding of what all women needed, she may have heard strategies for combating HIV that she could not have anticipated.

Self-Transparency Against Projected Needs

Managing conflict between the self's needs and desires and the other's good is key to avoiding conflict in both development and caregiving. It may appear that this type of conflict is not likely to lead to paternalism. Conflicts between the needs and desires of the helped and those of the helper typically produce neglect and exploitation rather than paternalism. However, "helpers" situated in relationships aimed at promoting the goods of others also risk confusing their own desires for the others' desires or projecting their desires onto others. This may produce UUP.

We can imagine Sarah being motivated by an inability to distinguish her desires from those of the Lombaba women. For instance, it may have been that those funding Sarah would only support projects focused on decreasing polygamy. We can even imagine Sarah selectively hearing the Lombaba women's comments or asking them questions that pushed them to focus on polygamy and then persuading herself that the focus on polygamy was genuinely generated by the Lombaba women. The discussion with the women only lasted three hours, but we can imagine this tendency to project needs onto them getting worse rather than better over the course of a prolonged relationship. The affective closeness that is likely to develop over the course of an extended development encounter makes it particularly easy to substitute felt solidarity with actual engagement with others.¹¹

Kittay proposes a virtue that may help offset the danger of projected needs in development practice. Kittay claims that good caregivers develop what she calls "transparent selves." Kittay describes the transparent self as follows:

the perception of and response to another's needs that are neither blocked out nor refracted through our own needs. Of course, no self is ever truly transparent in this sense, but such transparency is a benchmark for the self-conception of the dependency worker qua dependency worker. It is a regulative ideal for the dependency worker qua dependency worker. It is an altruistic ideal. But while altruism is often seen as morally supererogatory, this ideal is *required*.... (1999, 52)

Kittay sees the capacity to see another's needs without "refracting them through" one's own as crucial to the task of meeting the other's needs.

To see how self-transparency applies to development, it is helpful to view it as a partly epistemic virtue. Underlying the ideal of the transparent self are certain convictions about what it is necessary to know in "helping" relationships. For Kittay, dependency workers enter relationships designed for the benefit of their charges, not as

¹¹ Development ethnographer Andrea Cornwall describes how her desire to see commonalities in women's struggles across borders caused her to inadvertently distort the realities of Yoruba women traders she studied (2007).

disinterested vehicles to serve their charges, but as full persons with interests and desires-- that may need active confronting and grappling with. Within the ideal of the transparent self lies an acknowledgement that the caregiver must cultivate the ability to distinguish her needs and desires from her charges'.

One who exercises self-transparency asks important questions-- questions about how her relationship to another and the sorts of investment she has in it affect her ability to be open to the other. In development, self-transparency would require practitioners to search for certain specific types of information, information about what their own interests were and how these interests may distort their abilities to clearly perceive the interests of others. Rather than denying the potential for projecting their interests onto others, the virtue of self-transparency demands that development practitioners face and seek to understand their own interests and how they shape the relationships in which their work embeds them. The active struggle for self-transparency might have motivated a practitioner like Sarah to ask herself how her desires—say desires to follow the funders' dictates or desires to keep intact her understanding of feminism-- might have “refracted” the Lombaba women’s desires.

Narrative Understanding Against A Focus on the Here and Now

The virtue of narrative understanding can help development practitioners offset “presentist” biases that impede their capacities to perceive beneficiary needs. Caregivers sometimes fail by prioritizing current needs over future ones—by doing things *for* their charges in ways that prevent their charges from developing independence. For development practitioners, I submit the failure to accurately perceive needs may stem either from a failure to see the future or a failure to see the *past*. The practitioner who prioritizes the present over the future may impose a course of action without letting beneficiaries engage in the type of protracted learning process through which they might arrive at their own solution; she may fail to see the importance of cultivating future agency as a goal of development. A practitioner who sees the present over the past may ignore historical conditions that place limits on what beneficiaries will and will not say in a particular encounter. To return to Sarah, we might imagine that he was eager for a conclusion about the Lombaba women’s needs after a three-hour deliberation, because he failed to realize the importance of their cultivating agential skills that were transferable to future situations. Or we might imagine, as Fiedrich seems to, that Sarah is simply unaware that a history of colonial education frames how the Lombaba women communicate with her about sexuality.

Care ethicists theorize the virtue of “narrative understanding”-- of seeing moral decisions, not as discreet events, but rather as embedded in a past and reaching out into a future. Two intertwined temporal perspectives are required to approach the other with a caring attitude. First, the caregiver needs to be able to understand the history of her relationship with the charge as mattering to what the best course of action is in any particular situation. Second, the caregiver asks about how to promote the future well-being of the charge and welcomes change in the type of relationship she has with the charge when change will promote the other’s good. Gilligan illustrates these two temporal perspectives by comparing them to a justice perspective in her analysis of “A Jury of Her Peers” (Gilligan 1995, 42). In the story, a woman has murdered a man. Gilligan argues that narrative understanding enlarges the focus from being simply on the act of murder. The community’s women who come to the house after the murder

exercise the past-looking temporal perspective, and thus can see a history of abuse that lead to the murder. Their future-looking perspective allows them to see building stronger attachment among women as a way of preventing future violence of this sort.

A development practitioner who employs the past-looking component of narrative understanding will ask, not only about the history of beneficiary needs, but also about how the historical relationship between the practitioner and beneficiaries colors their representation of those needs. To look at the history of beneficiary needs is to ask about the circumstances and social structures that have brought them into being. Looking at the history of beneficiary needs will often require the practitioner to critically interrogate her identity as a “helper” in ways that may offset UUP; examining the structural causes of many of the problems associated with deprivation in the South may give the practitioner a more realistic sense of the type of change she can effect. To examine the history of the relationship between the practitioner and the beneficiaries is to ask about how relations of power shape her perception of their needs. In development, it will likely require looking at how the history of colonialism and involvement by public institutions structure the speech of development beneficiaries.¹² In contexts with strong colonial histories, beneficiaries have strong incentives to frame their desires in a colonial vocabulary.

The forward-looking perspective of narrative understanding may also help practitioners combat UUP. One motivation for UUP may be the belief that beneficiaries would likely prefer the same course of action as the practitioner if they engaged in thorough deliberation. That is, a practitioner may represent her view as the beneficiary view because she incorrectly believes that beneficiaries have quickly arrived at the same preferred course of action that she entered the encounter with. We can imagine Sarah thinking that she has allowed sufficient deliberation when the Lombaba women repeat the colonial agenda because she expects the Lombaba women to arrive at her pre-determined conclusions. But if Sarah viewed the cultivation of these women’s future agency as a worthy development goal, she might be less likely to cut off discussion or ignore conflicts within the discussion. The virtue of narrative understanding weighs against presentist biases that can encourage UUP.

Conclusion

I have argued that the caring epistemic virtues of narrative understanding, self-transparency, and concrete thinking can help development practitioners work against the temptations to UUP that are endemic to participatory development. Development and caregiving are both collaborative attempts to promote the good of one party under asymmetrical conditions that encourage the “helping” party to exaggerate her epistemic authority and fail to perceive challenges to it. This inability to perceive challenges to her authority to define the other’s good produces a temptation to unjustified unconscious paternalism—a form of paternalism in which the “helper” unconsciously substitutes her judgment about the other’s good for the other’s actual good or the other’s judgment of that good. Development practitioners, like caregivers, are likely to engage in UUP because their expectations involve rigid conceptions of universality, because they fail to acknowledge possible divergences between their desires and those of their charges, and

¹² Against this point, Alison Jaggar argues that care’s focus on specificity turns caregivers’ attention away from social structures (1995).

because they fail to see how the past and future shape what beneficiaries need and communicate about what they need. Epistemic virtues from care ethics can help practitioners combat these misunderstandings that cause them to inadvertently impose their judgment.

I close by identifying some limitations to my approach in this paper—the approach of prescribing caring virtues to ensure antipaternalist development practice. First, caring relationships are typically binary, where as development encounters usually involve a number of parties. Development involves negotiating multiple perspectives on beneficiary needs, since not all beneficiaries have identical needs and desires. Successfully applying caring virtues in development will require caring virtues to be coupled with virtues for negotiating and understanding heterogeneity within beneficiary communities. Second, and this is a limitation of any approach that prescribes virtues to resist paternalism in development, it is clear that we need institutional change, and not just virtuous practitioners to transform development as we know it. We know that paternalism is partly caused by institutional constraints on practitioner behavior—such as beholdenness to donor agendas. Transforming development will require changing the structures that incentivize practitioner behavior that does not focus on beneficiary needs. Prescribing caring virtues is a far from adequate solution to the many forms of paternalism that pervade development. Still, understanding UUP and the epistemic conditions that produce it-- as well as strategies for combating it-- is part of imagining a development practice that is genuinely driven by the needs and desires of those in the South.

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