Utilitas (2026), **38**, 102–118
doi:10.1017/S0953820826100235

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLES

How Relationships Mitigate Paternalistic Complaints (When They Do)

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(Received 18 December 2024; revised 4 July 2025; accepted 29 November 2025; first published online 20 February 2026)

Abstract
Many believe that relationships can make a constitutive difference to the moral status of paternalistic treatment. For example, it is often assumed that it's easier to justify paternalizing a spouse than a stranger. But although this thought is widespread, there exists no detailed account of how relationships could mitigate paternalistic complaints. The aim of this paper is to develop an account of this phenomenon, drawing on the work of Margaret Gilbert and the notion of joint commitments. According to the resulting view, close relations can constitutively mitigate paternalistic complaints by rendering paternalistic interference consistent with the will of the paternalized agent.

Keywords: Paternalism; intimate relations; friendship; joint commitments; social ontology

1 Introduction

Compare two cases:

> *Bystander.* Marc has been watching a person drinking heavily in the park for some time. The person drops their bottle opener on the ground. Marc discreetly moves it out of sight. Marc hopes that this will prevent them – for their own sake – from drinking more that day.

> *Partner.* Marc's partner, Sarah, drinks too much. To help Sarah reduce her alcohol consumption for her own sake, Marc hides the bottle opener from her. Marc hopes that this will prevent Sarah from drinking more on that day.

Marc subjects another person to *paternalistic treatment* in both cases. That is, he interferes in someone's life without their consent for their sake, that is, to promote their

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820826100235 Published online by Cambridge University Press

well-being.[1] *Bystander* and *Partner* have an almost identical structure with the one key difference being the kind of relation Marc has to the paternalized agent. But that difference, intuitively, seems to affect the moral status of Marc's act: Marc's paternalistic treatment feels less concerning in *Partner* than in *Bystander*. We shall take this as a datum and call it *the asymmetry*.

The asymmetry calls for an explanation. How could the fact that you stand in a close relation to someone *constitutively* affect the moral status of subjecting them to paternalistic treatment? To get the question right, it's worth keeping in mind that we should set aside details that might make a moral difference but are at best contingently related to the presence of close relations, such as attenuated duties of beneficence (Marc might have more stringent duties to care for the well-being of Sarah) or self-regarding concerns (Marc might have self-regarding reasons to help Sarah because his well-being is implicated with hers).

Thus conceived, there are at least two reasons to want an explanation of the asymmetry. First, although it is often *assumed* that close relations can constitutively mitigate paternalism, it has proven difficult to explain this.[2] This challenge has been brought out in a recent paper by Bengtson and Midtgaard (2023). Roughly, they take the constitutive view and derive from it the implication that paternalism is *always* less objectionable in close relationships (Bengtson and Midtgaard, 2023, 154). They go on to reject this implication, thereby implying that this casts doubt on the constitutive view. We agree with Bengtson and Midtgaard that paternalistic treatment is not *always* less problematic when it takes place within close relationships. But we disagree about the merits of the constitutive view. We develop a view that explains how close relationships constitutively matter for the moral status of paternalism and accommodates the possibility that relationships can have heterogeneous moral effects.

The interest in explaining the asymmetry goes beyond Bengtson and Midtgaard's specific challenge, however. A second – and as far as we can tell unnoticed – reason for wanting an explanation is that the asymmetry looks especially puzzling when conjoined with the standard model of permissible paternalistic treatment. According to this model, the central moral considerations that determine if paternalistic treatment is permissible (or impermissible) derive from considerations related to the *autonomy* and *well-being* of the paternalized agent (Archard, 1990; Arneson, 2005; Bollock, 2015; Enoch, 2016, 2020; Grill, 2007, 2010; Grill and Hanna, 2018, 5). According to this picture, paternalistic treatment infringes upon the autonomy interests of the paternalized agent but may sometimes be justified by the potential gain (or prevented loss) in the paternalized's well-being (cf. Oosterum, 2024).[3]

[1]More precisely, the standard view, which we'll be taking for granted here, holds that A's paternalistic treatment of B involves three things: (i) A interferes with B's agency and/or judgment (cf. Dworkin, 1971, 79; Shiffrin, 2000, 215), (ii) without B's consent, (iii) for the sake of B (see Coons and Weber, 2013; Bullock, 2015; Dworkin, 2020; Midtgaard, 2021 for overviews).

[2]The asymmetry is endorsed in, e.g., Birks (2021), Tsai (2016a, 2016b, 2018), Enoch (2016, 34). Bengtson and Midtgaard (2023) call the view that, 'Paternalistic acts in intimate relations are (. . .) less wrong than similar acts undertaken outside the intimate circle' the 'standard view'.

[3]Some endorse a more complicated picture. For example, Quong (2010, ch. 3), Shiffrin (2000), and Tsai (2018) say that the moral permissibility of paternalistic treatment is a function of whether the act would be disrespectful, where disrespect is independent of the other concerns mentioned (cf. Arneson, 2018; Begon, 2016; Hanna, 2018, ch. 3). But as long as we grant that close relations (the central difference between *Partner* and *Stranger*) doesn't constitutively give rise to differences in disrespect, the puzzle remains intact. See discussion of this in Bengtson and Midtgaard (2023), esp. section 2.3. As regards our solution to the puzzle it speaks primarily to a conception of the wrongness of paternalism according to which autonomy plays a key

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But in crafting the pair of cases meant to illustrate the asymmetry we have taken care to match the well-being at stake and the nature of the interference to ensure that we hone in on the (alleged) significance of close relations. Hence, it looks like the standard model would predict that *Bystander* and *Partner* should not be evaluated differently.[4] The puzzle brings out the point that it is not only the case – as per Bengtson and Midtgaard's (2023) contention – that we lack a good explanation of the asymmetry. Even worse, the standard model could seem to rule out its truth. In the worst case, we find ourselves with a dilemma: reject the asymmetry (endorse the claim that the presence of close relations do *not* constitutively mitigate complaints about paternalistic treatment) *or* reject the standard model (endorse the claim that the moral status of paternalistic acts cannot be exhaustively accounted for by focusing on well-being interests and autonomy interests, and the balance between them).

On this background, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, we develop a novel account – the joint commitment account – of the asymmetry that explains how close relations constitutively affect the moral status of paternalistic treatment. George Tsai has thrown important light on how this might be the case (2016a, 2016b, 2018. Yet see criticism in Bengtson and Midtgaard, 2023). However, his contribution falls short of providing a unified explanation of the way in which constitutive features of close relations make paternalism less problematic. We provide such an explanation here. Second, we show that this view is consistent with the standard model, thus escaping the apparent dilemma sketched above. In sum, the principal contribution of this paper lies in throwing light on the significance of close relations (and other forms of social involvement) to the moral evaluation of paternalistic treatment.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we account for the metaphysics of close relations and other forms of shared action. Against this backdrop, we put forward the joint commitment account of the asymmetry (section 3). Next, in section 4, we consider key worries regarding our account. Then, in section 5, we explore further the joint commitment account showing for instance that it sometimes implies that paternalism is *more* problematic in close relations, and that sometimes other features than whether A and B stand in a close relation are salient as regard the wrongness of paternalism. Section 6 concludes.

2 Joint commitments and their inherent normativity

Our account of the asymmetry falls into three stages. The two first are the subject of this section. We will begin by giving an account of what it means to be in a close relation with someone, drawing on insights from the philosophical field known as social ontology and in particular the work of Margaret Gilbert. Next, we offer an account of how close relations, generally speaking, give rise to deontic phenomena such as rights and obligations. With these tools in hand, we will in the next section return to the case of paternalism to develop our preferred account of the asymmetry.

role. Yet we do not consider this to be a problematic limit of our account. First, the autonomy account has much going for it (see, e.g., Enoch, 2016, 2020). Second, it is unclear that even key accounts that authors associate with the disrespect account deny a central role to autonomy. For example, while Shiffrin stresses the problem with paternalism need not lie in infringements of distinct autonomy rights, it is not clear that she denies that it rests on an infringement of autonomy in a relevant sense.

[4]One example of a view that runs into this puzzle is Tsai's (2018, 358) contention that close relations matter to the permissibility of paternalistic treatment.

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Let's begin by stating carefully what it means for two or more people to be parties in a close relation, such as an intimate relation. On a perfectly general picture, we can analyze such relationships as instances of *joint commitments*.[5] To unpack what this means, let's start with the term 'commitment'. Let's say that a *commitment* is a mental state that reflects an exercise of the will and, when, undertaken, serves to commit an agent to some aim, goal, or plan with a certain degree of robustness (e.g., Gilbert, 1990, 1999; Bratman, 1999; Goodin, 2023; Valentini, 2021). Functionally, commitments ensure that an individual is inclined to act and deliberate in certain ways that are conducive towards achieving the aim, if they are otherwise rational. To illustrate this, suppose I make up my mind and form the intention to go shopping tomorrow. By forming the intention, I commit myself to the goal of shopping tomorrow, and unless I am akratic, have false beliefs, or change my mind, I will be disposed to deliberate in ways that are conducive towards the goal (for example, I'll be thinking about identifying the means necessary to achieve the ends I am committed to), and act in ways that I believe are conducive towards the goal (e.g., boarding a bus to the city).[6]

What interests us here are not individual commitments per se, but instead *joint* commitments. What does it mean for a commitment to be undertaken *jointly*? One suggestion, due to Margaret Gilbert, is that a joint commitment is a commitment undertaken by two or more people *as a body* (e.g., Gilbert, 2013; Schmid, 2023).[7] Joint commitments have the same functional profile as individual commitments, but with the crucial difference that what the committers have committed themselves to are pursuing some aim *together* or *as a group*. For example, you and I ('we', really) may decide to go shopping tomorrow together, and in virtue of doing so create a joint commitment that each of us are committed to and in some sense share intersubjectively.[8] When this commitment plays the right kind of causal role in explaining why it is that we coordinate our actions and go to the store and buy things, it is the case that we are engaged in the activity of shopping *together*, as opposed to shopping individually.[9] In this way, the notion of joint commitment helps to explicate the ordinary thought that close relations, as well as other forms of social involvement, involve a 'we' or an 'us' as the acting subject, as opposed to merely an 'I' or multiple 'Is' acting in parallel.

All commitments, individual and joint, are commitments to a certain kind of goal. But these goals may of course vary. They can be many or few, they can be clear or vague,

[5]We speak about 'joint' and 'shared' commitments interchangeably. Yet we acknowledge that one may for some purposes, for example responsibility attribution, want to distinguish between shared responsibility and joint responsibility where the former involves blaming a collection of individuals separately, and the latter blaming a group as a whole and members of that group as part of the group. See, Knudsen (2023, 149).

[6]One way to gloss this is by saying that you are *rationally* committed to the goal (compare Gilbert 2013, 31).

[7]'A joint commitment is not a complex of personal commitments, nor does a joint commitment have parts in the way such a complex does, each part being a particular personal commitment. Rather than Heinrich and Andrea each creating part of their joint commitment by his or her expression of readiness to be jointly committed, their two expressions create the whole when and only when both expressions are in place' (Gilbert 2013, 32).

[8]Joint commitments are also sometimes said to involve certain patterns of knowledge or common knowledge (Gilbert, 1999; Bratman, 1999). We suppress these details here for simplicity.

[9]Social metaphysicians disagree over how to best characterize the pattern of attitudes – typically some form of collective intention – involved in socially coordinated action. See for example Bratman (1999) and Rachar (2024).

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they can be narrow in scope or broad-scoped and they can, importantly, be subject to ongoing shaping and negotiation between the members of the group. Consider a pair of friends as an illustration. We are all familiar with the kind of friendship where it matters less what exactly you do together, as opposed to the fact that you do something together. For such commitments, a central structuring goal – what the friends are jointly committed to – may just be the goal of spending time together or being together, where it's left open-ended and up for negotiation how this time is best spent together. Contrast this with the kind of joint commitment you might have with your squash partner – someone, let's imagine, that you hardly spend time with outside the squash hall. Your joint commitment is structured around one crisp goal, that of playing squash together, possibly in combination with certain auxiliary or functionally necessary sub-goals that are needed to promote the central goal you are committed to.

One may worry that the notion of joint commitment sounds overly voluntaristic. But that can't be right, since many forms of social engagement arise spontaneously and perhaps even unintentionally. Think about a crowded bus where a group of people must in the case of an emergency – perhaps without communicating – coordinate their activities to exit the bus in an orderly and timely manner. That too, we believe, is an example of a shared activity governed by a joint commitment, but one that has arisen spontaneously (Salomone-Sehr, 2024). Likewise, joint commitments and obligations may in part derive from a 'social practice [that] attaches to membership in some biological or social group, like the responsibilities of family or friends or neighbors'; and the belonging that generates such commitments is not necessarily 'a matter of choice or consent' (Dworkin, 1986, 196). Related, joint commitments need not involve that the parties have explicitly waived certain of their rights. They could involve forfeiture. For example, Max may enter a romantic relationship with Maxime, not giving it a thought that this standardly implies some obligations (e.g. that his football practice does not trump an obligation to drive Maxime to an important appointment at the doctors). Still by virtue of having engaged in the relationship requirements of this sort plausibly apply to him.[10]

So much for the metaphysics of joint action. Let's now turn to the normative dynamics of joint commitments. It is a familiar idea that by undertaking commitments you may constitutively shape the normative landscape. Consider promising. By promising something to you, I undertake and express a commitment to do what I promise and create an obligation for myself to do as I have promised. If I don't act as promised, several subsequent normative phenomena are created as a result. For example, you may gain permission to blame me, and I may incur a duty to apologize or compensate you for my wrongdoing.

Things are only slightly different for joint commitments. Consider again promising. Your mother and father may jointly promise you to take you on a holiday this summer. In doing so, they now jointly – as a body or group – incur a duty to take you on holiday. That fact alone will shape the normative landscape differently from individual obligations. For instance, if you are not taken on holiday you will be permitted to blame both your mother and your father. Moreover, if your father refuses to go and your mother travels with you, you are still, despite your mother's efforts, in a position to complain because what you were promised was going with them *as a group*.

[10]We thank an anonymous referee for asking us to make this clarification.

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As illustrated above, a group of people may incur obligations towards someone that isn't a member of the group. But joint commitments typically also shape the normative 'interior' of a social relation, partly as a function of what the members of the group are committed to. Relations create permissions and obligations that are directed towards other members of the relation. Relations include their own conventionally determined normativity, as it were. They define a set of actions that count as permissible or impermissible depending on what the relationship is about, which in turn is fixed by commitments. As a shorthand, we can say that relations have a normative scope. Certain actions count as permissible (or perhaps even required) when undertaken in the context of the relationship and in this sense falls within the normative scope of the relation. Actions that are impermissible, by contrast, fall outside the scope of what the relationship permits.

Take once more the case of being jointly committed to play squash together. If all we are committed to is playing squash at regular intervals, then it could be inappropriate to share personal feelings and thoughts with your partner during the break. On the other hand, such actions may be within the scope of – and therefore appropriate to – a friendship. The last point is particularly significant because it demonstrates how the existence of joint commitments can render activities permissible (i.e., making it the case that sharing personal details no longer counts as 'oversharing') that would otherwise count as impermissible (Rachels, 1975).

We can state this intuitive idea more carefully. As Gilbert puts it, if two or more people are jointly committed, 'to doing something as a body, each owes the other appropriate actions by virtue of their joint commitment'. (Gilbert, 1999, 151). In other words, in virtue of undertaking a joint commitment, each party gets certain directed rights and obligations.[11] Importantly, Gilbert adds, they 'owe each other actions by virtue of their participation in the joint commitment and that alone. Consideration of what bad consequences might flow from violation of the commitment, for instance, is not relevant to the issue'. (ibid.). Thus joint commitments are, when undertaken, a distinct source of normative rights and obligations that shape the 'interior' of a social relation somewhat independently of the relation-independent moral reasons that exist prior to them. Various permissions form important parts of that interior and help constitute the relation in question by picking out certain persons that enjoy such permissions – permissions not enjoyed by people generally. For example, we cannot go around putting in order aspects of strangers' clothing, say, brushing off dandruff on the shoulders of their jacket. Yet if we are a couple going out (or if we see our partner off to work), we may have the permission (perhaps even obligation) to do so. More generally by exercising certain moral powers we can let our guards down toward particular others, allowing them to cater to our goods in ways others may not or to take our good as reasons for acting in certain ways towards us – even when we may not be in agreement with the person acting towards us regarding where our good lies in the matter at hand (cf. Parry, 2017; Tadros, 2017; Owens, 2012).

What do such rights and duties look like in practice? That, Gilbert says, depends on the content of the joint commitment: 'the content of these obligations and rights is determined by determining that Anne and Ben are parties to a joint commitment with a particular content. This content may be very precise. It may also be relatively vague' (1999, 152).

[11]Gilbert (1999) claims that obligation is constitutive of joint commitments. Bratman (1999) denies it.

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Since the idea that joint commitments give rise to directed duties and obligations is crucial to the argument below, it's worth working through an example of what this might look like in practice. To illustrate, suppose that Michael and Margaret agree to go on a walk together, and their agreement gives rise to a joint commitment.[12] It now seems that they owe to each other to coordinate their walking. We can bring this out by thinking about what would happen if one party for some reason ceased to coordinate appropriately. Suppose that walking together goes well at first, but suddenly Margaret launches ahead without waiting for Michael. It seems, in this case, that Michael is entitled to ask or even demand that Margaret wait for him. Suppose, in the other direction, that Michael stumbles and cannot easily proceed. It seems that Margaret would have an obligation to aid Michael to ensure that their jointly undertaken goal succeeds. Conversely, under certain conditions, it could be that Michael would be required to accept Margaret's help. If *not* accepting help would undermine the pursuit of their goal – walking together – it seems that Michael should let himself be helped as part of their collaboration. If not, there would be a need for re-negotiation of the terms of the commitment or simply disintegrate as a group engaged in a shared activity, by abandoning the commitment.

Since this will become important later: What if we imagine that Michael is falling behind, Margaret hasn't noticed, but a stranger walking next to them has? Would it then be appropriate for the stranger to help Michael catch up? Perhaps it would be, all-things-considered, but this intervention would be subject to ordinary, interpersonal normative constraints. Those would tell us that such action in the hands of a stranger would be inappropriate: it would be like a stranger brushing off dandruff on your jacket. At least, the stranger would have to ask for Michael's permission to help him, and Michael probably wouldn't be in a position to demand help from the stranger. Moreover, since we are dealing with a joint commitment, it's natural to think that Margaret could also be entitled to a say over whether the stranger helps Michael since he by doing so interferes with their shared activity.

On the other hand, such constraints would be absent if Margaret were to slow her pace to help Michael, since she could justify her act directly with reference to the fact that Michael and her are jointly committed to walking together. Similarly, Michael could demand Margaret's help directly with reference to their joint commitment. The asymmetry between Margaret and the stranger nicely illustrates how joint commitments normatively bind those that are committed while leaving those that are not, unaffected.

This isn't meant as an exhaustive list of the rights and duties a joint commitment might engender. More weakly, the point is to illustrate that joint commitments are an independent source of normative incidents and that thinking about the nature of the committed-to goal is inevitable when trying to clarify the rights and duties that may befall committers. Moreover, joint commitments are, at their core, *commitments to coordinate one's actions with others aimed at a certain goal*. This observation should call for modesty: We shouldn't always expect there to be an informative high-level description of the rights and duties created by a joint commitment since what a group member ought to do to coordinate their action is both dependent on the nature of the activity and how members act and interpret their duties.

[12]This example is inspired by Gilbert (1990).

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3 The joint commitment account

We are now in a position to state:

> *The Joint commitment account of the asymmetry:* Paternalistic treatment within close relations is less objectionable when, and because, it constitutes appropriate responses to the existence of joint commitments.

We have already defined the terms going into the joint commitment account, so let us instead focus on its implications: If we have a pair of cases such as *Bystander-Partner* that manages to bring out clearly the moral factors of beneficence and autonomy alongside the dimension of a closely knit relation vs. one that isn't, and paternalistic treatment looks less objectionable in one case than the other, it is due to the existence of a joint commitment to some plan or goal that would render the paternalistic treatment permissible. One upshot of this account is that we cannot apply the joint commitment account with an eye to the question of whether paternalistic treatment would be permissible within some relationship without getting specific about the content of this relation.

So let's work through a version of *Partner* to showcase the account. Let's imagine that Marc subjects Sarah to paternalistic treatment without her consent by hiding the bottle opener. And let's grant that there is a decent case for paternalizing her: On the best evidence available to Marc, Sarah won't sober up unless she's interfered with (she's been trying for a while now on her own, but with little success, but, alas, Sarah is stubborn and won't be able to recognize this); and her not doing so will affect her well-being negatively.

To explain that Marc's paternalistic interference looks permissible, we can appeal to the fact that Marc and Sarah are jointly committed to the goal of having a close relationship. Let's suppose, furthermore, that Sarah's drinking isn't just a minor nuisance in light of that goal: It represents a serious threat to their relationship, either in the long run or in the short run, if nothing is done. If so, it looks like Marc would be permitted to help Sarah, even if she doesn't recognize this herself and would resist being helped. We can deliver this verdict by thinking about what would count as 'appropriate actions' – actions that Marc and Sarah would owe each other to perform – given what they are committed to.

What if we relax the assumption that Sarah's drinking is an outright threat to their relationship? Perhaps it's just a minor nuisance that creates occasional frustrations and less than ideal cooperation (for example, Sarah has been drinking too much the night before and is thus hungover at a family dinner the next day). Even still, the joint commitment account can deliver the verdict that Marc is in a position to interfere with her for the sake of the success of their coordinated activity. In judging whether Marc has this permission, we can think about the goals that their shared action aims at, and whether Marc's interference with Sarah would be necessary and proportionate in light of its contribution to the success of their shared activity. But, clearly, the less Sarah's action manifests a failure of proper coordination, the weaker the case for paternalism (and interference) will be. If, for example, Sarah has a guilty pleasure of watching TikTok for a short time every day, then, even if it annoys Marc, it's unclear that it would, as per their joint commitments, warrant him somehow to interfere in this habit of Sarah's.

On the face of things, it might seem that we need to stipulate a lot for the joint commitment account to deliver the desired verdict. But notice how this is no different

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from how we earlier reasoned about the rights and duties that we concluded Margaret and Michael would owe to one another in the case of them walking together. Only by thinking about the nature of the goal they are committed to, and what kind of support would be needed from each of them for the plan to succeed, could we arrive at such judgments as, say, that Margaret would have to slow down and wait for Michael or that Michael would have to support Margaret's walking.

We will consider more cases in the subsequent section, but for now we want to reflect on a different and more fundamental question: Why, exactly, should we believe that joint commitments have the normative power to mitigate paternalistic complaints? Answering this question is crucial for the joint commitment account to explain the asymmetry.

Joint commitments can mitigate at least the central complaint about paternalism, viz. the autonomy complaint.[13] Notice that when Marc and Sarah have a joint commitment that this commitment reflects an exercise of, and commitment by, their individual wills.[14] In other words, their joint commitment embodies their *shared will*, just like an individual commitment embodies an individual's will. When this shared will is the source of the rights and obligations – actions we deem appropriate to perform within a close relation – then performing these actions will amount to complying with the shared will. The final step is observing that if an act is aligned with someone's will, then this act cannot easily affront their autonomy. Consider consent as a parallel illustration of the point. In ordinary cases, when someone consents to your phi-ing and you phi, then phi-ing doesn't affront their autonomy because your action is guided by an expression of their will. Applied to *Partner* and *Bystander*, what we are suggesting is that the existence of a close relation between Marc and Sarah mitigates Sarah's complaint that Marc's interference violates her autonomy, because his interference involves an activity that expresses Sarah's will. Let's call this the *autonomy-preserving rationale for the joint commitment account*.

Notice that this rationale doesn't only help us see how joint commitments could mitigate paternalistic complaints. It is also conservative in the sense that it renders the thought that close relations constitutively – that is, in virtue of what these relations are – affect the permissibility of paternalism compatible with the standard model for permissible paternalistic treatment. This is because the moral force of joint commitments reduces to something that is directly relevant to the paternalistic 'calculus': autonomy. On the other hand, appealing to close relations and joint commitments remains explanatorily indispensable because there are many distinct ways in which one's autonomy can be manifested and we should take care to keep them apart. To see this, observe that the existence of a close relation (and therefore a joint commitment) may license the inference that interference could be consistent with the will of the person interfered with. But we cannot go the other way around. We cannot take the fact that A's interference is consistent with B's will to support the conclusion that A and B must therefore have a close relation. A's interference could become consistent with B's will through other mechanisms. For example, B could have given their consent, B could have requested interference or B could will A's action without any expression. But all these remain distinct ways of manifesting one's will. In this way, the joint commitment account tells us what the normative significance of close relations is while preserving the

[13]cf. n. 3.

[14]This is arguably not necessarily the case (see Salomone-Sehr, 2024 for discussion), but we are here interested in the case where close relations succeed in mitigating paternalistic complaints.

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thought that close relations are a distinct social phenomenon with the function of enabling coordination and commitment to a shared goal.

4 Potential challenges to the joint commitment account

We have more to say on how the joint commitment account helps us think through concrete cases, but before we do so let us address some potential objections to our account.[15]

We have said that joint commitments can mitigate problematic features of paternalism by ensuring that interference is in one respect consistent with the will of the paternalized agent. But we also said earlier that paternalistic treatment implies that action is undertaken against the will of the paternalized agent or at least without their consent. Given this, it could seem that our explanation has lost sight of how Marc's treatment of Sarah is paternalistic. It may seem that what we have shown is not that *paternalism* is sometimes less concerning in close relations (cf. Bengtson and Midtgaard, 2023, 176). Instead, we might just have shown that interference in close relations need not be paternalistic.

In response to this challenge, our account makes room for the possibility that Marc's treatment of Sarah is less problematic than his treatment of the stranger yet remains paternalistic. To see this, compare:

> *Partner, partial compliance.* Marc's partner, Sarah, drinks too much. To help Sarah reduce her alcohol consumption for her own sake, Marc hides the bottle opener from her. Marc hopes that this will prevent Sarah from drinking more on that day. Sarah hasn't realized the profundity of her problem[16] and would resist Marc's interference were she aware of what he is doing.

> *Partner, full compliance.* Marc's partner, Sarah, drinks too much. To help Sarah reduce her alcohol consumption for her own sake, Marc hides the bottle opener from her. Marc hopes that this will prevent Sarah from drinking more on that day. Sarah is well aware of the profundity of her problems and recognizes that she needs Marc's help.

We use the labels 'full compliance' and 'partial compliance' to highlight how the two cases involve different degrees of successful coordination between Marc and Sarah towards a shared goal – similarly to how Michael and Margaret might be more or less successful in coordinating their walking together and how a jazz band might be more or less successful in coordinating their playing together.

Intuitively, these cases should be evaluated differently; it's hard to get the intuition that *full compliance* is paternalistic or even problematic. On the other hand, we think Marc is permitted to interfere in *partial compliance* but at the same time the case feels worse than *full compliance*. Moreover, it seems to us that the residual badness in *partial compliance* is the bad of paternalism. Why? Because although Marc acts within the scope

[15]Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking us to address these challenges.

[16]We do not understand Sarah's lack of realization in this regard as something that would make her resistance involuntary. After all, in many regards we may not fully realize the profundity of some of our problems (e.g. we may not realize how bad it is for us not to exercise) without this making it the case that we are acting in a substantively involuntary manner.

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of their shared commitment, Marc's and Sarah's individual perspectives aren't fully aligned on the question of how their joint commitment should be pursued. This shows that there could remain a sense in which Marc acts against the individual will of Sarah, even if we consider his act is justified by the joint commitment that reflects their shared will. (Here it's worth keeping in mind that the joint commitment that expresses their shared will is an emergent property that cannot be fully reduced to bundles of individual wills.) We think this demonstrates how our account can make sense of the idea that joint commitments mitigate paternalism but in a way that doesn't necessarily render the interference non-paternalistic. There is still room for thinking that something is wrong (or less good than it could be) in *Partner*-type cases from the perspective of a concern with paternalistic treatment.

Our answer to the first challenge may give rise to another. Couldn't *Partner* equally well be described as Marc holding Sarah to her duty that she owes him in virtue of their joint commitment? If so, we might once again lose sight of the idea that Marc acts paternalistically since holding someone to their duty doesn't look like a standard case of welfare paternalism. Once more, the worry is that we have not explained how paternalistic treatment is less problematic in close relations but just shown that Marc's action is not paternalistic.

In response to this, we think that whether the description of the case warrants the label 'paternalism' depends on what motivates Marc. We could imagine that he would be motivated by his own self-interest (it will be bad for me if Sarah doesn't stop drinking) or by the fact that he thinks Sarah owes him (and perhaps even herself) to sober up and is therefore liable to his interference. But of course, for the case to count as paternalistic we should imagine that Marc is motivated by the prospect of benefiting Sarah, i.e. of catering to her well-being, for example, by promoting a goal that he knows Sarah is committed to and would benefit from being satisfied. (Notice that Marc doesn't have to be motivated only by this for the act to count as paternalistic.)

The last point deserves a qualification. As we see things, the question of whether Marc acts permissibly is settled by the existence of the joint commitment, independently of what motivates Marc's interference with Sarah. But the question of whether Marc acts paternalistically should be answered with reference to Marc's motivating reasons. This means that we cannot take the existence of a joint commitment that justifies Marc's interference to imply that he is in part motivated by his partner's well-being. Ideally, we might think that what would justify Marc's action should also be what motivates him, but such correspondence is not a given.[17] More strongly, it seems to us that a tendency towards a paternalistic motive would be the default in psychologically well-functioning relationships. Wouldn't it seem odd if Marc was motivated by the pursuit of a shared goal and his own well-being in relation to the completion of this goal but remain cold to the fact that the completion of the goal would also promote Sarah's well-being?

5 Exploring the joint commitment account

With the joint commitment account on the table, we have the resources to explore substantive questions about how relations impact the case for paternalism. We explore two such questions below, and the fact that the joint commitment account helps us answer them seems to count in favor of it being fruitful.

[17]It seems to us that Bengtson and Midtgaard (2023) overlook the distinction between commitments playing a justificatory role and them playing a motivational role in their discussion.

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5.a Weighing relation-dependent and relation-independent reasons

According to the proposed picture, the permissibility of paternalistic treatment is a function of relation-dependent and relation-independent reasons. This prompts a question: How, if at all, do these reasons mesh? To work through this question, consider a stock of cases of permissible paternalistic treatment that do not make reference to relations:

> *Dangerous Bridge.* Lou is planning to cross a bridge without knowing that it's damaged and won't carry her weight. Matthew, a stranger to Lou, knows this and prevents Lou from crossing.

Matthew subjects Lou to paternalistic treatment in a way that is standardly considered morally acceptable. By stipulation, Lou and Matthew do not have a close relationship. This is a case where relationship-independent reasons – predominantly reasons related to the well-being and autonomy of the paternalized agent, it seems – determine what Matthew should do. Here is a question worth asking: suppose we introduced relation-dependent reasons to the picture. How, if at all, would this affect Matthew's reasons to paternalize Lou? To make things concrete consider:

> *Dangerous Bridge #2.* Lou is planning to cross a bridge without knowing that it's damaged and won't carry her weight. Matthew is Lou's partner and they are jointly committed to each other's well-being.

> *Dangerous Bridge #3.* Lou is planning to cross a bridge without knowing that it's damaged and won't carry her weight. Matthew is Lou's partner and they have agreed on not interfering with each other's goal, even for the sake of the other's well-being.

In *Dangerous Bridge #2*, Matthew has relation-dependent reasons that are largely consonant with the relationship-independent reasons. As such, what Matthew should do remains unchanged (relative to *Dangerous Bridge*); he still ought to interfere. Perhaps, though, adding the relation-dependent reasons would determine how Matthew were to act if he had to choose between interfering with Lou and interfering with a stranger in a similar position. But at the same time, given that we have already assumed that strangers have permission to interfere on paternalistic grounds, the significance of close relations falls into the background.

But we can easily flip the picture by considering a different case, *Dangerous Bridge #3,* where relationship-dependent reasons and relationship-independent reasons pull in different directions. This case is in part interesting because it illustrates that close relations needn't mitigate complaints against paternalistic treatment. In special cases, such relations may – instead of making restrictions on using a person's good to justify certain acts laxer – serve to *amplify* paternalistic complaints, depending on what exactly the members of a relation have committed themselves to. So, interestingly, there is an 'asymmetry' in the other direction as well, though it's understandable why this may have been overlooked in the literature given the special circumstances in the case under consideration.[18]

[18]More carefully: 'sometimes paternalistic treatment is more objectionable in close relations'. An important exception to the neglect of this point in the literature is Carl Fox (2019). Fox points out that for

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How should Matthew act in *Dangerous Bridge #3*? Here it's worth recognizing that the joint commitment account isn't meant to procure exact answers to delicate moral dilemmas – its purpose is to explain how close relations shape the normative landscape. Hence, we want to remain open about what Matthew ought to do all-things-considered. What remains clear, though, is that Matthew cannot *easily* decide to interfere, since doing so would have him flout the fact that he and Lou are jointly committed to *not* interfering with each other. By contrast, a stranger passing by could permissibly and 'easily' decide to interfere. Perhaps it matters, at the end of the day, that Lou's belief about the stability of the bridge is ill-founded, to the effect that Matthew should interfere all-things-considered. But we can certainly see why Matthew's available reasons could give him a reason to stand back. He and Lou are jointly committed to a relationship where they are committed to giving each other space, even if this might come at a significant cost to their well-being (and to other valuable aspects of their relationship, see fn. 18).

This may prompt a more general question: why do relation-dependent reasons have less force in cases like *Dangerous Bridge*? One possible explanation is that the moral reasons we associate with relationship-independent interpersonal morality – i.e., reasons related to beneficence – have a certain weight and stringency in such cases. In other words, we may be making the assumption that Lou will be harmed *a lot* if she attempts to cross the bridge, and we owe it to each other as parties to a shared moral community to respond to such reasons. More generally, since so much is at stake for the stranger if she crosses the bridge she cannot credibly assert that Matthew's interference is none of his business. At that level of seriousness, Lou potentially harming herself *is* his business. If Matthew ignores this, that would amount to him ignoring the fact that he and Lou (in the case where she is a stranger) stand in a relation-independent moral community.

In the other direction, when Stranger-Matthew cannot interfere with Lou and hide the bottle opener to benefit her, this may be explained with reference to such factors as the invasiveness of the interference and absence of immediate urgency when contrasted with *Dangerous Bridge*. (Contrast, for example, that it might look permissible for Stranger-Matthew to hide Lou's keys to her without her consent to prevent her from driving while drunk; it might be so, obviously, for both paternalistic and non-paternalistic reasons.) On the other hand, were Matthew in an appropriate close relation to Lou where their well-being is a shared goal, Matthew would still have to justify his actions with reference to how this could benefit Lou, but he could more easily escape Lou's complaint that his action is invasive and none of his business because – well – it is. Lou is, in a sense, jointly committed to Matthew looking after her.

In sum, we see that relation-dependent and relationship-independent reasons for paternalistic treatment can combine, but might pull in different directions. When close relations weigh against paternalistic interference, and such cases may be largely atypical, this may be explained with reference to how the committers are jointly committed to

example paternalism amongst friends may in some respect be more problematic than cases in which A paternalizes a stranger B are (2019, 331). Why? Because more is at stake relationship-wise. That is, the former sort of paternalism may to a higher degree do damage to a particular relationship between equals. It may put in jeopardy the mutual respect between two friends or lovers that in part constitutes their relationship. The movie *Leaving Las Vegas* is a case in point. Following several set-backs Ben goes to Las Vegas to drink himself to death. He meets Sera, and they become intimately involved. Yet Ben is vehement regarding his plan and Sera respects and understands this. Accordingly, were Sera to interfere with Ben's drinking there is arguably a sense in which this would be worse than were Chad, a stranger, to do something similar.

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strict noninterference as a shared goal. In the other direction, when close relations make paternalistic treatment viable it is because joint commitments silence a complaint against interference that would otherwise stand undefeated by the prospective gain in well-being.

5.b Joint commitments and disagreement

We have argued that when paternalistic treatment is less objectionable in close relations, then it is because the treatment is, at some level of description, consistent with the will of the paternalized agent. But it's worth recognizing that there are limits to what activities may be justified by joint commitments, so how do we parcel out this territory?

One way of doing so would be to place cases on a continuum. Take a non-paternalistic version of *Partner* where Sarah requests (and in this way individually commits to) Marc's intervention. In this case, we can say that Marc and Sarah's coordinated action is *fully cooperative*. Their individual wills are fully aligned via Sarah's request.

We then have cases of paternalistic treatment where Sarah would refuse if she knew what Marc was up to, but remains jointly committed to their relationship (the original version of *Stranger*). In this case, we face a substantive question about what the relationship is about (its goals) and what kinds of actions would be appropriate to ensure successful coordination. The different perspectives that Marc and Sarah take on the appropriateness of Marc's interference could be the result of the shared commitment not playing the right kind of functional role in regulating Sarah's deliberation and action. This is a case where Sarah and Marc's joint action is *less than fully cooperative*, since Marc takes certain measures to keep Sarah 'in line' with their joint commitment.[19]

But there is also the possibility that Marc is wrong about the nature of their joint commitment and what actions it justifies. To see this, consider the following case:

> *Provocative Attire*. Marc and Sarah are heading to a nightclub, and Sarah has chosen a short skirt and a revealing top for the evening. Marc, concerned that her outfit might draw unwanted attention from some male guests and that this might put her in danger, suggests she consider wearing something less revealing.

On a natural way of filling in the details, it's easy to imagine that Sarah could object to Marc's advice as wrongfully paternalistic *and be right at that*. One way to analyze this case would be to think that the prospective benefit by advice-giving fails to outweigh the invasiveness or 'meddlesomeness' that the advice-giving can be interpreted as. If that's the case, we might think that Marc has 'overstepped' and interpreted too liberally what counts as a matter of common concern in light of their close relation and joint commitment. This shows that in cases where paternalistic treatment is mitigated by close relations it must be the case that the paternalizer is right about the nature and scope of the joint commitment (including if the paternalized agent is indeed committed). If these preconditions are not in place, as is natural to imagine in *Provocative Attire*, the relation won't mitigate paternalistic complaints since this instance is outside of its normative scope. While it is admittedly messy (since we have to

[19]Notice that in ordinary cases of paternalistic treatment it's natural to think of paternalism as a way of keeping people in line with their own priorities (in cases of soft paternalism) or in line with what according to the paternalizer would be worthwhile for them to do (in cases of hard paternalism).

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fill in the details and make assumptions about what the relation reflects a commitment *to*), we think this picture must be the right one.

The Bridge cases are arguably cases of so-called 'soft' paternalism – Lou is about to enter the bridge without knowledge of its condition. Other cases we have considered, including the case of Marc and Sarah, could be considered 'hard' forms of paternalism in the sense that the paternalizer does not only interfere in cases where the paternalized acts involuntarily. Yet they may take the form of so-called 'means' or 'weak' paternalism in that the paternalizer interferes only with the means an agent employs to achieve their ends, not with the agent's ends (cf. Dworkin, 2020). For example, Marc interferes with Sarah on the presumption that her aims or ends reflect their joint commitment, yet she is not employing the appropriate means to achieve those ends. But it's worth bringing up in this context cases of so-called 'ends' or 'strong' paternalism. Such cases involve paternalistic treatment on a background of deep(er) disagreement about fundamental goals. To illustrate:

> *Career planning*. Mio is considering a career in fine arts, where the pay is low and positions are precarious. Her partner, Noah, thinks it would be better for her to pursue a law degree because the pay is high and employment is stable. Noah interferes in various ways to nudge Mio towards what he takes to be the superior goals.

Faced with such cases we may wonder: could joint commitments ever render strong paternalistic treatment permissible? Our answer to this question is – predictably – that it depends on what, exactly, Noah and Mio are jointly committed to. To be sure, it's easy to interpret the case as one where Noah is overstepping and inappropriately paternalizing Mio. But, again, this depends on the details. There is nothing in the way of imagining a close relationship where part of the joint commitment is a commitment to being mutually and reciprocally shaped by another in terms of what values one endorses and what fundamental individual commitments one wants to undertake (where this, to be sure, could still be a version of *Partner, partial compliance*). In fact, part of the value of such relations may precisely lie in how it enables us to invite trusted people into our deliberations, consistent with keeping other people out (compare Bolinger, 2019). In such cases, we can think of the joint commitment account as demonstrating how it is possible for an individual to 'outsource' some of their agency and agential deliberations to a group. On this picture, Noah could perhaps be permitted to steer or manipulate Mio with the aim of benefiting her, in a way that would be consistent with her will being decisive, whereas it's hard to imagine that Noah could ever be permitted to take more invasive measures, such as applying for law classes on Mio's behalf. Whereas the former sort of influences may be consistent with the 'we' Noah and Mio constitute or are continually constructing, the latter is perhaps not, and may even constitute a threat to the 'we' in question (cf. Nozick, 1989, 68–86). (Readers that balk at the implied assessment of the gravity of the mentioned measures can plug in their favored examples of respectively relatively mild and relatively harsh measures.)

In sum, the following, complex picture emerges. For paternalistic treatment to be less objectionable in close relations, it must be the case that the paternalizer and paternalized are jointly committed to certain goals (and therefore in agreement on those goals) that would make paternalistic treatment appropriate. However, this is consistent with there being disagreement among paternalizer and paternalized about means to agreed upon ends and/or about the exact nature of such ends, the precise weight they should be

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assigned vis-a-vis other aims, and so on and so forth. One moral limit to paternalistic treatment in close relations, therefore, exists where disagreement between the paternalizer and paternalized renders their joint commitment impossible to sustain. If A wants to climb Kilimanjaro and B is content with a Sunday trek followed by rest on the couch perhaps they should part ways. Moreover, part of the committed-to goal can be to make oneself vulnerable to the kind of interferences that would ordinarily count as objectionably paternalistic.

6 Conclusion

How, if at all, could paternalistic treatment be less objectionable, if not outright permissible, in virtue of the fact that it takes place within the scope of a close relation? In this paper, we have developed the joint commitment account as a response to this question and explained how this account is consistent with the standard view that the moral status of paternalistic treatment involves a trade-off between respecting the autonomy of the paternalized agent and responding to their well-being. In brief, joint commitments may sometimes give us permissions to interfere with those that we are co-committed with in the pursuit of a shared goal. We have also suggested, pace the existing literature, that the asymmetry sometimes will run in the opposite direction, in the sense that there can be cases where paternalistic treatment is more objectionable in close relations.

Acknowledgements. For useful comments and suggestions we thank: Andreas Bengtson, Morten Dige, Viki Lyngby Hvid, Nicolai Knudsen, Jonas Lykke Larsen, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen and two anonymous referees from this journal.

Author contributions. Unequal (Munch 75% Midtgaard 25%).

Financial support. This work was supported by the Danish National Research Foundation under Grant DNRF144 and the Independent Research Fund Denmark under Grant 10.46540/4282-00077B ('Hybrid Agency and Moral Responsibility' (HARM)).

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Cite this article: Munch, Lauritz Aastrup and Søren Flinch Midtgaard. 2026. How Relationships Mitigate Paternalistic Complaints (When They Do). *Utilitas* **38**, 102–118. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820826100235

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