
Economics and Paternalism: A Missed Opportunity

Christophe Salvat^{*1} and David Philippy^{*†}

¹Triangle, CNRS-ENS Lyon (UMR 5206) – CNRS : UMR5206 – Lyon, France

Résumé

Sunstein and Thaler's recent publications on libertarian paternalism have largely contributed to renew the debate about the moral legitimacy of paternalism. In economics, however, they did not add much to our approach of rationality. This is rather unfortunate as, we want to argue, the real interest of their theory relies – or could rely – on the way they approach disinterested actions. Sunstein and Thaler only see in paternalism a way to improve individuals' decisions that are subject to cognitive or behavioural biases. Their sole concern is to prove that libertarian paternalism is rationally efficient (by counteracting hyperbolic discounting or framing effects for instance) and ethically acceptable (by minimizing its infringement on individual freedom). The efficiency of their 'nudges' has hardly been questioned so far contrary to its alleged ethical innocuousness, which has triggered a wave of adverse criticisms. The debate about libertarian or behavioural paternalism has since almost exclusively dwelled on this single issue. There was yet other aspects of their theory that were worth discussing both from an economical and a philosophical point of view. I have already discussed potential issues with the economic efficiency of nudges. The present paper proposes to deal with the motivation of the paternalist agents, whom the authors suppose disinterested. Disinterested actions have not so far really been considered as such by economists. Sunstein and Thaler suppose that paternalists agents are altruist but do not give any empirical or theoretical evidence to support their view. There are, however, a number of behavioural studies that could have been used to show that some situations are more likely to prompt altruistic actions than others, however altruistic individuals really are. Not only would it have strengthened their point, which is otherwise rather weak, but more importantly it opened a second level of paternalism, a kind of meta-paternalism intended to boost individuals' tendencies to act paternalistically or, in other words, to nudge them into nudging.

^{*}Intervenant

[†]Auteur correspondant: David.Philippy@unil.ch